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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

VOL. I.

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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“GRANDMOTHER’S MONEY,” “NO CHURCH,”

“LITTLE KATE KIRBY,”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1873.

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LONDON:
PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL, BLENHEIM HOUSE,
BLENHEIM STREET, OXFORD STREET.

Gen. nos. Pary 19 Apr. 53 Holland 3 v. Macy 2 Q 53

BIRMINGHAM.

Ben
Jeffrey R. Rios

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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE BIG ROOM AT "THE BULL."

"GOING, going!" and once more the ivory hammer was raised above the little caroty head of the auctioneer. "No advance upon four thousand six hundred pounds? This magnificent freehold property going for the small—I may say the absurd—amount of four thousand six hundred pounds! No advance, then? Going—go——"

Mr. Whistleshaft had really intended to close proceedings at last; in his mind's eye there was no further bidding likely to ensue. The big room at "The Bull" was not so full as it had been; the company had grown weary of Mr. Whistleshaft's not too eloquent discourse—those who had

come for curiosity's sake were making a terrible noise in descending the stairs, and those who meant business were shuffling their feet restlessly, and gaping and rubbing their eyes—when a low, clear, musical voice—a woman's voice—brought fresh interest to bear upon the case, and checked the downward tendency of the hammer.

“Four thousand seven hundred.”

“Four thousand seven hundred! Only just in time—thank you. Four thousand seven hundred, I think you said, madam?” the auctioneer remarked, as if the sudden suspicion had seized him that this might not be a legitimate transaction—that some young person, “up to her larks,” had made her appearance in the club-room of “The Bull” with the intention of creating confusion at the eleventh hour, and throwing out the legitimate bidding. There were a stir and confusion below him, and he was scarcely satisfied. In the first place, the last bidder was a new comer; in the second, she was a stranger to him—he who knew everybody in Chingford; and, in the third, it was a remarkable feature at a country sale for a young lady of eighteen years of age to enter the room and bid *in propria*

personâ for a shooting-box and fifty acres of land attached thereto. It was eccentric—it was unbusiness-like—it was so sensational that Mr. Whistleshaft felt himself bursting into a cold perspiration at the excitement and curiosity of his friends, neighbours, acquaintances, and patrons. Everybody in the room was looking towards the last bidder, who, unprepared for the attention which she had created, shrank nervously to the side of a tall, hard-featured, elderly woman, in a big, old-fashioned straw bonnet crossed with broad black ribbons.

“Four thousand seven hundred pounds!” said Mr. Whistleshaft, less energetically. “Come, Sir Charles, another hundred,” he added, almost coaxingly, to the gentleman who had been outbidden; “the property is a bargain at anything less than six thousand. The railway will be through it in a year or two—it’s a fortune to investors.”

Sir Charles, a thin, spare man, with a black cravat fastened so tightly round the throat that it was a miracle it had not stopped more than half the circulation of his blood, shook his head emphatically in dissent, and then stood on tiptoe to gaze over the hats of the company at the lady

who had outbidden him for the Weddercombe property. He had, in his own opinion, gone a little beyond the mark in offering four thousand six hundred pounds—the place had been a fancy of his; it adjoined his own estate; it would have rendered his possessions complete, and he had not considered a hundred or two in keeping Bennett, the wholesale draper, away; it was the full outside value, and he had offered it. Sir Charles was a suspicious man, and the voice of the last bidder suggested a sister, or some relative of Whistleshaft's, sent to run him up at the last moment, the auctioneer knowing full well that he, Sir Charles, had set his heart upon the property. It was a shabby artifice, a transparent bit of Whistleshaftism, he thought, and ten per cent. more of the blood in his body contrived to squeeze past his black stock and deepen the purple in his cheeks, as he reflected upon the matter, and glared at a slight, graceful, dark-haired girl, whose veil, drawn before her face, did not dim in any great degree the lustre of two big brown eyes, or disguise the excitement and anxiety that were in them.

There was no further bidding. Had the young lady fired a pistol at Mr. Whistleshaft,

or made him an offer of marriage in the middle of his business pursuits, there could have been scarcely more confusion in the room. It was very unaccountable, the auctioneer thought. He wished that he had allowed his hammer to fall a moment earlier. He had had a good offer for a small property from Sir Charles, and should have been satisfied with obliging the Baronet—for the Baronet was an old customer. Heaven and earth! perhaps the young lady was a lunatic, and that old woman in the big straw bonnet was her keeper! The sooner the mystery was cleared up the better. In the whole course of his experience he had not known anything like it.

“Going—no more offers—positively going then, this fine property, for a mere song! Going—*gone!* Gone for four thousand seven hundred pounds. Your name, madam? Will you please to step this way and pay your deposit? Gentlemen, I must ask you to make room for the lady; I must really.”

Mr. Whistleshaft descended from his pulpit and took his place beside his clerk. He was hot and nervous; he was sure that something was wrong by the manner of the purchaser, by the noise and bustle of the county gentry and

farmers and townsfolk who had filled "The Bull" that day. He was prepared for any excuse, for all his trouble over again that day week, for giving the young lady in charge of the rural constabulary, or entering an action against her parents and guardians for allowing her to interrupt him in his profession, and bring discredit to him. Young ladies did not buy estates strongly recommended for the shooting accommodation they afforded, and for being situated in a good hunting county. Why the deuce had he not thought of that before, and not snapped at another hundred pounds in his greed for commission? Why had he not asked the lady if she really intended to purchase the property—if she had fully considered the matter when she took him and the company unawares by entering the room at a late hour of that wintry afternoon, and bidding over the heads of the general community?

There was considerable difficulty in the purchaser making her way to the auctioneer, despite his remonstrances. The little world of Chingford was a curious world, and was extra curious that day; and it was not till the tall, angular woman, by whom she was accompanied, had shouldered a passage for her companion grave-

ly and persistently, that Mr. Whistleshaft and the young lady were face to face, with a mob of Chingford folk closing round them.

“Is there no private room where this can be arranged?” asked the young lady, glancing with a certain amount of nervousness at the faces near her. “Is it the country fashion to transact business in this manner? Where is your office, Mr.—Mr. Whistleshaft?” she asked, after a moment’s hesitation over a name that was unfamiliar to her. “I will call upon you in the evening.”

“Oh, yes,” thought Mr. Whistleshaft—“it’s a practical joke, then!” He had been “done”—it was all a delusion, and he the victim of it. The whole thing was very plain.

“My office is in the High Street; but, before you quit the room, madam, I must trouble you for your name and address, and for a deposit of ten per cent. upon the purchase-money, as stated in the conditions of sale, which you will find on page two.”

He had no faith in getting a halfpenny from her, and he was therefore very much astonished when the lady drew forth a small red morocco pocket-book, and said, calmly,

“That will be four hundred and seventy pounds. I will give you a bank-note for five hundred.”

“Thank you—God bless us—dear me !” ejaculated Mr. Whistleshaft.

She was not an escaped lunatic, but a *bonâ fide* purchaser ! The bank-note was a guarantee of good faith ; it was a fresh, crisp, brand-new and unmistakable Bank of England note for the respectable sum of five hundred pounds. He did not remember when he had been more glad to see a bank-note, and there had been epochs in his career when bank-notes were scarce enough.

“I will write you a receipt for this,” he said ; “and, if you will favour me with the address of your solicitor, I——”

“I will call upon you this evening, at your office,” was the reply.

“Can I call upon you, madam ?” he asked, with great politeness.

She hesitated for an instant, as though considering the expediency of the proposal, and then said,

“No, thank you. I will call at seven, on my way back to the railway-station.”

“Thank you, madam. Anyone will show you

Mr. Whistleshaft's office in the High Street. What name shall I put down in the receipt?"

There was so strange a silence in the room, which was darkening now in the twilight, that the entry of a waiter with two lighted candles in plated candlesticks was resented as a turbulent intrusion upon an interesting stage of the proceedings, and an angry "hush" rewarded his appearance.

"What name?" repeated the lady, oddly enough, and like a woman who was in doubt concerning it, or reluctant to disclose it.

Mr. Whistleshaft looked up, and the hard-featured woman at his side said, in harsh tones—"Shaldon."

"Miss Shaldon," said the other, as a lady's address-card was placed by the side of the receipt, which Mr. Whistleshaft was signing. "That is the name."

"Christian name, if you please?" inquired the auctioneer.

"Helena."

"Thank you."

The receipt was filled in, and tendered to Miss Shaldon, who placed it in her purse, and then, followed by her grim attendant, walked

slowly from the room, plenty of way being made for her now, and many respectful glances being cast in her direction.

It was in this wise that the Weddercombe property was arranged to change hands, and the mystery of Helena Shaldon began with the first step towards the transfer.

CHAPTER II.

WHISTLESHAFT AT HOME.

MR. WILLIAM WHISTLESHAFT, Estate and House Agent, Licensed Auctioneer and Appraiser, 4, High Street, Chingford, sat before the fire in his best room, and waited for the pleasure of Miss Shaldon's company. The old-fashioned brass clock, in its mahogany case, in the centre of his mantelpiece, had already chimed half-past seven, proving that Miss Shaldon was a young lady wanting sadly in habits of punctuality, a virtue which, as a rule, is set down as incontestably feminine. When it was a quarter to eight, a pretty, auburn-haired, fresh-faced girl, of sixteen or seventeen years of age, put her head round the door, and laughed pleasantly at her brother.

“How about this wonderful Miss Shaldon now, Will?”

“It’s rather odd, but I haven’t given her up yet,” was the reply.

“Has she given you up?” was the sister’s suggestion.

“I wish you wouldn’t, Polly,” Mr. Whistleshaft said, querulously. “I don’t wish to be interrupted or disturbed. I wish that I hadn’t told you anything concerning this business.”

“Oh, how cross we are!” ejaculated Miss Whistleshaft; and then the door closed with the faintest suspicion of a slam, and Mr. Whistleshaft was left to himself.

“Thank heaven I’ve got a deposit!” he muttered.

When the timepiece had struck eight, he took the bank-note from his pocket-book, and inspected it carefully. There was no doubt of its legitimacy—so far so good; but what was the next step, if Miss Shaldon had left for London without favouring him with that call which she had promised? He was of a nervous, even an irritable temperament, for he walked about the room, and round and round his horse-hair-bottomed chairs, dropping into each in turn, making

fitful snatches at a local newspaper, and vainly endeavouring to take an interest in its contents.

“It’s deuced annoying,” he said, when he was standing by the window, with the blind drawn partly aside; “I wonder where she has got to?”

The windows of Mr. Whistleshaft’s best room looked upon the High Street, which was dimly lighted by gas, and deserted at that hour. The Chingford folk went early to bed, and there was not a shop open in the place. It was a dull, dark night, and as he pressed his face close to the glass, he became aware that soft filaments of snow—the forerunners of a Winter’s storm—were flickering slantwise across the street.

“It’s not a nice night, but then business is business,” he soliloquised; “and if I knew where to find her, I’d——”

Mr. Whistleshaft jumped back a foot, as a big bare hand—a claw-like kind of hand—swung itself round from the left, where his street door was, and rattled its nails with startling suddenness against the window-pane through which he had been peering. Before he had recovered himself, a sallow, rigid countenance was pressed against the glass without. The auctioneer,

who was a man of observation, recognised the woman by whom Miss Shaldon had been accompanied that afternoon.

“Let me in,” he heard her say distinctly; and Mr. Whistleshaft took the hint, and went into his small hall, opened the street door, and admitted the woman, who entered with ponderous-like steps, as a man might have done carrying a heavy weight on his back. Mr. Whistleshaft peered eagerly over her shoulder, in the hope of discovering Miss Shaldon behind her, but there was no sign of that lady. He was far from satisfied, and when his visitor was standing in the hall, he put his head round the door into the cold street.

“Are you looking for anyone?” asked a grating voice in his ear.

“For your mistress,” he replied; “is she— isn’t she——”

“No—she is not.”

“Oh, indeed !”

Mr. Whistleshaft took the reply to mean that Miss Shaldon was not coming that evening. He shut his street door, and led the way to the room he had quitted, placing a chair for his visitor, who sat down therein with all her

weight—and she was evidently a weighty woman—after which it was heard cracking like a nut. Looking at her as she sat under an unpretentious ormolu finger-post kind of gas branch, he was astonished at her height, and angularity, and ugliness. She might have passed for a man in disguise, had it not been for a certain womanly expression that is difficult to define, and that not even her unmitigated plainness could take away. She was an older woman also than he had heretofore imagined, for, as she pushed back the bonnet from her face, as if to breathe more freely, and as women of an inferior class are in the habit of doing, Mr. Whistleshaft observed that her hair was as white as snow. He regarded this fact with too much intentness to please her, for she absolutely scowled at him.

“Never mind that,” she said, gruffly; “I can’t help it.”

“Excuse me; I was only wondering——”

“Whether it was age or trouble?” she said, quickly. “Say trouble. Now let us get on.”

“Certainly.”

Mr. Whistleshaft wondered what kind of trouble had bleached her hair; but he sat oppo-

site her, and did not put his wonderment into words.

“I have had some difficulty to find you,” the woman commenced. “It’s like a dead street after dark.”

“It’s a little dull, perhaps, but my name is on the brass-plate outside.”

“I didn’t see it, and I didn’t care to ask anybody,” she replied. “I have come to say that my mistress—you were right about her being my mistress—will see you at ‘The Bull.’”

“Miss Shaldon is there, then? I was afraid that she had left Chingford by the eight o’clock train.”

“She will not leave Chingford at all.”

“I shall be most happy to wait upon Miss Shaldon at ‘The Bull,’” said Mr. Whistleshaft, very politely—for Miss Shaldon was rich, and might put business in his way. “I hope that Miss Shaldon has not expected me. I certainly understood that her intention was to call here upon her way to——”

“London. So it was. But she has changed her mind.”

“Changed her mind.” Mr. Whistleshaft felt uneasy and nervous again. If this mysterious

Miss Shaldon was of so volatile a disposition, it was probable that she had changed her mind concerning the purchase of the Weddercombe property, and wanted her deposit back. He was of a conciliatory and obliging disposition, but, so far as that little point was concerned—not if he knew it!

“At what time will it suit Miss Shaldon’s convenience to see me, my good woman?” was his next inquiry.

The “good woman” had one unamiable trait—her temper was not of the best, the trouble at which she had hinted having possibly soured it. She knit her brows, thick and bushy and grey, at the patronising cognomen which Mr. Whistleshaft had bestowed upon her. In small matters there was an odd punctiliousness about her.

“I don’t care to be ‘good-womaned,’” she said, half thoughtfully; “my name is Graves.”

It was not a cheerful kind of name, and Mr. Whistleshaft’s back broke into goose-flesh.

“It will suit Miss Shaldon’s convenience to see you now,” she said, half satirically; “and you can come along with me.”

“Certainly,” said he, rising with alacrity.

He would be glad to understand the position, Miss Shaldon, and even Mrs. Graves, more clearly, and the sooner the interview had taken place the better. Mrs. Graves did not rise with him, however.

"I think she will see you now," Mrs. Graves added, somewhat doubtfully. "She has met friends, but I suppose they have gone by this time."

"Oh, she has friends in Chingford, then?" Mr. Whistleshaft exclaimed.

"No, they're not Chingford people. It's they that stopped her coming here."

"I see," said Mr. Whistleshaft.

"She's a young lady with many friends ; you needn't think she's without them because she's here with me for company, or because——"

She did not complete her sentence. She rose, and, after tightening a plaid shawl across her chest, walked towards the door. Mr. Whistleshaft was a curious man, and in this instance he was bursting with curiosity.

"Because——Mrs. Graves?" he said, interrogatively.

"Or because she comes to such a place as Weddercombe," Mrs. Graves said, after a steady

stare at the auctioneer, "which suits her, and which she will suit."

"But——"

"Shall we go?"

Mrs. Graves did not wait for an answer to this question, but strode into the passage, and endeavoured, without success, to open the door.

"Allow me, Mrs. Graves," said Mr. Whistleshaft; "there are two locks, you see."

"What do you want with two locks?" asked Mrs. Graves, somewhat curious in her turn.

"One is kept locked during the day; at night the second is an additional security."

"Are there bad characters about this place, then?"

"Certainly not," was the unhesitating reply.

"I'm glad to hear it," she muttered to herself, as if it were a matter of importance to her. Mr. Whistleshaft, a trifle more perplexed, stepped after her into the street; he closed the door behind him, and the two incongruous items of humanity went together up the High Street, where the snow had it all its own way along with the wind, and was whirling and eddying in sharp fierce currents that were unpleasant to confront.

"It's a rough night," said the auctioneer; "Miss Shaldon was quite right not to face the elements."

"Ay," was the half assent, as Mrs. Graves trudged on, with her bonnet so much upon her shoulders that Mr. Whistleshaft was half disposed to tell her of it. She had forgotten that the heat of his room had led her to push it impatiently from her face, and of the snow of heaven drifting a little amidst time's snow upon her head she took no heed.

"Miss Shaldon does not look very strong," he said.

He was more interested in Miss Shaldon than in Mrs. Graves, and any information concerning her would be thankfully received. He was a young man—only eight-and-twenty—and youth and beauty interested him almost as much as auctioneering, or the affairs of his friends and neighbours, or the general news of Chingford, which was a place, however, that rarely had any news beyond the market prices.

"She is strong—you mistake," said Mrs. Graves.

"A slight girl, pale, and delicate-looking—I should scarcely have thought that," he said.

"She is very strong," Mrs. Graves repeated ;
"I do not know that I have met, in all my life,
a stronger woman."

"Strong-minded, you mean?"

"I don't mean that."

"Will she keep much company at Weddercombe, supposing that she has taken Weddercombe for herself, do you think?" continued the auctioneer. "Or perhaps her parents, or——" He stopped as the ungloved and hard hand of his companion gripped his arm familiarly.

"You are a curious man, I take it," said the old woman ; "shall I give you some advice before we go any further?"

"Ahem ! yes, if it will be of any use to me," he said, discomfited by her earnestness and gravity.

"Advice from old people is often of benefit to the young," she remarked, sententiously ; "and you do not appear to be a particularly wise young man."

"Don't I, though?" he replied, with a forced little laugh. "Well, what's the advice, old lady?"

"It's no use trying to worm anything out of me—cleverer people than you have tried that

before," she said bluntly ; " and it's no use your trying to get anything out of my mistress. You will best serve her and your own trade by leaving her alone. She has nothing to disguise, but nothing to relate, and she will object most strongly to any interference."

" I don't want to interfere with Miss Shal-don," said Mr. Whistleshaft, restive beneath this reproof; " what made you think that I did? I'm not an inquisitive man, thank Heaven; I'm well known and respected, and looked up to in this town, and anybody can tell you that's the truth, ma'am."

Mrs. Graves was not paying much attention to this encomium. When he had finished, she said—

" I will tell you, if you like, what my mistress has come to Weddercombe for."

" What for?" he asked in a tone which belied part of his last assertion.

" Peace."

" Oh," said Mr. Whistleshaft, baffled for an instant; then he added sharply, " Hasn't she found any peace where she came from?"

Mrs. Graves, startled at this rejoinder, pulled her bonnet over her head, and walked on more

rapidly. It was one point scored by the auctioneer.

"I did not say that," she replied, hastily.

There was no further conversation between them till "The Bull Inn" was reached. Outside its doors she pointed to a window immediately above the portico.

"Is that blind drawn to the bottom of the window?" she inquired. "My eyesight is not what it used to be."

"It's drawn down half way."

"You'll have to wait somewhere till you're sent for, then."

"I shall be in the coffee-room. Anyone knows me," he said, boastfully, as he strutted into the coffee-room aforesaid; and Mrs. Graves went up a broad flight of brass-edged stairs without taking further heed of him.

CHAPTER III.

HELENA.

THE auctioneer and estate agent, who, by some ingenious means, had contrived to make a living out of the little town of Chingford, was not a being of any great degree of refinement. It may be set down in three words that he was a vulgar man. His own words make good the assertion.

“This is a blessed rum start !” he said, as he marched into the coffee-room and towards the fire burning therein, shaking off the snow from his hat and coat as he proceeded.

He was perplexed, and did not see his way. There was something very mysterious about Miss Shaldon and the old woman who was her companion, and the more he saw of them the less he understood them. What did that hate-

ful old woman mean by giving him advice, by setting herself up as his equal, by almost warning him? And then, as a climax, to bring him to "The Bull Inn," where he discovered that a code of signals with the window-blinds had been arranged between mistress and servant before he could procure the honour of an admittance to the former! Brooding upon it all as he walked towards the extremity of the room, he arrived at the conclusion that it was "a blessed rum start," and, though he might have expressed himself in more graceful phraseology, he was certainly correct in the main.

He was not aware until he had reached the hearth-rug that a man was ensconced in a capacious leathern arm-chair before the fire. The back of the chair was turned towards him; and the individual, sleeping with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders above his ears, was another little surprise when he had reached the mantelpiece.

"I beg your pardon, sir—I did not know that——" Mr. Whistleshaft began, and then he came to an abrupt conclusion, as he discovered that the stranger was sleeping heavily. "One of Miss Shaldon's friends," was his next idea, as

he looked down upon him. Certainly a stranger, a person whom he had not seen before in Chingford ; he should have known him if he had. No, he had not seen that face before—he should never forget it again. He stood with his back to the fire and studied it, as if it were a face that he should like to learn by heart. It was rather a handsome countenance in its repose, with a forehead that overhung the eyes a little, and was surmounted by a mass of brown hair, wavy and tangled, which flourished luxuriantly ; a moustache of enormous length trailed from his lips almost to his shoulders. He was shabbily dressed, his coat cuffs were frayed, and there was a wide rent and a glimpse of dirty linen under his left arm. At his feet lay a felt hat, which had slipped from his nerveless fingers in his sleep and fallen to the floor.

“Yes, my man, I shall know you again, if it is necessary,” said Mr. Whistleshaft. “Perhaps you’re another Shaldon—a poor relation, or a disreputable one ; there’s no telling who you are, but, if you haven’t something to do with those two witches up-stairs, I’m hanged !”

The door opened, and Mrs. Graves entered, with a letter in her hand. She had removed

her bonnet, and looked, if possible, more angular without it. She beckoned to Mr. Whistleshaft, who crossed the room towards her.

“Miss Shaldon waits for you,” she said.

“Will you lead the way, Mrs. Graves?”

“It is room No. 14. You can find it yourself, I hope.”

“I’ll try,” he said.

He went out of the room, and Mrs. Graves held the door open and watched him up the stairs. He glanced back when he knew that the turn of the staircase would take him out of view, and Mrs. Graves was still following him with her keen grey eyes, almost as if she doubted him—almost as if she suspected that he would retrace his steps and come back to listen. As if he would have dreamed of such a dirty action as that!

He reached the door of No. 14 and knocked. A soft voice from within bade him enter, and he turned the handle and stepped into the room.

Miss Shaldon was sitting at an open desk, with a pen in her right hand, and her left supporting her head. She was gazing very intently at the door, and it was not till he had closed

it behind him and approached her that the thoughtful far-away look died out of her eyes. She was very pretty he had thought that afternoon, but, without her hat and veil, and with her raven hair in striking contrast to her pale face, she appeared, even to this unrefined intruder, singularly beautiful. There was hardly a fault to be discovered in her features, which were of a Grecian type, and betokened refinement, education, possibly high birth. It was a speaking countenance, as the phrase runs—it told a great deal of its owner's thoughts in its strange flexibility. She had been almost afraid, Mr. Whistleshaft thought shrewdly, that some one else would enter the room instead of him—perhaps “that seedy cove” downstairs, with a moustache big enough for six. She seemed very glad to see him instead, and William Whistleshaft took it as a compliment.

“Good evening,” Miss Shaldon said, cheerfully, with a smile that seemed to set him in a glow, and give him pins and needles in his temples; “pray sit down, Mr. Whistleshaft. I have to apologise for bringing you back to the inn, but I could not call at your house, as I had at first intended—I was detained here.”

“It is of no consequence,” said the auctioneer, politely.

“This is a dreadful night to bring you from your fireside—from your wife and family, perhaps?”

“I am not married, Miss Shaldon,” he hastened to explain.

“That is a disadvantage to a business man, I have heard,” she said; “but then I have heard a great many wise observations in my life.”

There was a ring of satire, even of sadness, in her tones, but she shook it off like a water-drop the instant afterwards. She was a young woman of much excitability, of ready speech and action.

“Concerning this Weddercombe estate now? We will get to business, if you please.”

“If you please, madam.”

“I see here”—and she took from the table the printed papers relating to the sale, and let them drop again—“that the purchaser is entitled to immediate possession of the property. What do you call immediate possession?”

“As soon as the deeds can be examined by your solicitor, and the fresh deed conveying the property to you is made out, signed, and sealed.”

"Are your solicitors honourable men?"

"To be sure!" cried Mr. Whistleshaft, shocked at so personal an inquiry.

"Of long standing in the county?"

"The firm, from father to son, has existed in these parts a hundred years."

"I will leave the matter in their hands altogether. I can trust them as my solicitors also. It's a matter of no great consequence if I can't," she added.

"Of no great consequence!" Did she mean by that sudden and reckless observation that, if she were even defrauded of her property, it would not matter? How rich the young lady must be!

"I will write to them this evening," she said; "I wish to be settled at Weddercombe before the week is out."

"I am afraid, madam, that is impossible."

"I will try to conquer impossibilities," she said, lightly.

Mr. Whistleshaft had nothing to say in reply to this, and Miss Shaldon closed and locked her travelling-desk, and exchanged her seat for one close to the fire, before which she spread her fair white hands, as though she were cold,

gazing steadily at the cheerful flame meanwhile.

It was in this mood that she forgot the presence of Mr. Whistleshaft, till his nervous cough brought her back from a land that was foreign to every thought of his, and from which she had possibly come to Chingford to escape.

"The house lies back from the main road half a mile, I think?"

"About that distance, I should say."

"And is not visible from the main road?"

"Not even in the Winter-time, Miss Shaldon."

"A fair seclusion shut in amongst the trees, away from a sad world," she said, apostrophising the fire rather than Mr. Whistleshaft. "Peace will come there, or never."

Peace! Miss Shaldon was in quest of it—the old woman had said so half an hour since.

"I beg pardon—you remarked——" began the auctioneer.

"I hardly know what I am saying," she said, with a smile; "my journey to-day has disturbed me. Who is Sir Charles?" she inquired, in a different tone.

"A gentleman who was extremely anxious to secure the property, as it adjoins his own."

"Sir Charles—what?—Grandison?"

"Come, you haven't got the name quite right," he returned, venturing on a laugh himself, as Miss Shaldon smiled again; "it's Andison, not Grandison. I don't know anybody of the last name in these parts."

"Mr. Richardson said Sir Charles Grandison was a finished gentleman," said Miss Shaldon, dryly.

"What, Richardson the blacksmith? Lor', he does not know anything about gentlemen; and it's Andison, madam, not Grandison, please to remember. You cannot offend Sir Charles more deeply than by calling him out of his name."

"I shall not have an opportunity of calling him by any name," said Miss Shaldon.

"He will be your neighbour, madam."

"His plantations will adjoin mine, certainly; but his mansion is two miles from my house. I object to neighbours." She looked up and caught Mr. Whistleshaft's glance, which was full of the deepest interest. "I have not learned to love them as myself, at present, though I may be more fortunate at Weddercombe."

She laughed, and, if there were a sad undertone echoing amidst her mirth, it was not per-

ceptible to Mr. Whistleshaft. He had been surprised to find so agreeable a young lady ; and, however mysterious she might be, he felt that he was sure of his money, and that he had not been made a dupe that afternoon. When she rose, he perceived for the first time that she was in mourning, and that there was crape upon her dress ; he wondered that it had not struck him before, but he had been gazing at her face, and vainly endeavouring, in his shallow little way, to guess at truths which had puzzled wiser men than he. He rose also at her hint, and she said—

“I think we understand each other, Mr. Whistleshaft. You will exert your best ability to second my wish to obtain possession of the property as soon as possible. I wish to be at home—to feel at home.”

“You may rely upon my best endeavour to secure the end that you desire,” Mr. Whistleshaft said, with a low bow ; “but——”

“But it will be done. You will do your best, and success awaits you. Thank you very much. Good evening.”

Mr. Whistleshaft bowed himself from the room, and Miss Shaldon returned to her desk,

and wrote a letter to those solicitors whose movements she was anxious to expedite. She was a woman skilful with her pen, and to whom words came freely; a letter of two pages was finished in a few minutes, and she was sealing it when Mrs. Graves came into the room. She was even humming a tune softly to herself as the old woman entered, and that was a surprise even for Mrs. Graves.

“Singing—at last!” she said. “You!”

“Was I?” she cried. “Oh, I did not think that that would ever happen again—did you?”

“No.”

“Time is a great restorer; it may bring me back my old self, or something better and less worldly, Jane, if I wait and hope and pray.”

“I’ll pray it may, along with you,” said Mrs. Graves earnestly.

“Has Arthur gone?”

“Yes.”

“That’s well. He keeps his word, and all the shadows are stealing back from me. Presently there will be light for the poor little woman to whom you cling so faithfully. I think there will—I am sure there will!” she cried, clapping her hands together like an impulsive child.

“You are too quick and rash and weak.”

She had told Mr. Whistleshaft that Helena Shaldon was very strong—were Mrs. Graves’s statements to be implicitly relied upon?

The younger woman accepted the reproof in all humility.

“I am like an escaped bird to-night, Jane; I am not myself—you must not mind me,” she said, half apologetically, but still in the same excited tones. “See, I begin my new life—that peaceful rest of which I am hopeful. With the world at arm’s-length, shut in at Weddercombe with my books and birds, with no one to trouble me, and no one whom I shall care to trouble, with the past at rest and the future free from anxiety, there will be light and life enough for my acceptance and rejoicing.”

The white-haired woman regarded her with great interest and affection.

“Ah! if you were not so young!” she said.

“I shall grow out of that,” Helena Shaldon replied, half-mockingly; “and I don’t feel young—only at times, you know. Heaven knows that I grew old very early in my life.”

The thoughts of that premature ageing deepened the expression of her beauty, but sad-

dened it intensely. The watchful old woman saw this. "But you never despaired; you kept strong, and fought through it all."

"Fought through it to this," she said, with a momentary bitterness. "Yes!"

"You have had a fatiguing day. I would try to rest, Helena."

"I think I will," she answered wearily; "if I dream of being settled at Weddercombe, I shall be happy enough. You said," she added, in allusion to some past dialogue between them, "that Weddercombe was one of my wild fancies. Is it so?"

"That depends upon how it turns out."

"Ah! so it does. Still you must not dash me down too suddenly, when I am sanguine of the better days."

"I am an old woman, Helena, and look at life darkly. But I will do my best."

"As you have always done."

"As I have always done," echoed Mrs. Graves.

Helena rested her hands on the shoulders of her companion, and kissed her on both cheeks.

"You will come to my room before I am asleep," she said.

"As if you were a child, and I had charge of you," responded Mrs. Graves.

"Yes, take care of me, Jane," said Helena Shaldon; "oh, my second mother, when the first——"

"Hush, hush! the mother is dead, and the dead must rest," interrupted Mrs. Graves. "Your friend, your second mother—anything, Helena, so long as you wish it, and I still live. But will you wish it always?" she asked, jealously.

"Always."

"I the humble servant, housekeeper, 'mistress of the robes,' and you the great lady coming down in state to rule at Weddercombe."

"To try to rule myself, you mean," she said. "There, good night; if I have been too wilful, too excitable, too troublesome to-day, forgive me and forget it."

"I forgive you and forget it, Helena," was the answer; "and if I have been too cold and unsympathetic, why——"

"But you haven't," said the fair girl, interrupting her; "for I understand you, and don't mind you. There!"

She kissed the old woman again, and passed

out of the room, and Mrs. Graves, after standing motionless for a while, walked to the window, drew the blind aside, and looked out at the snow, which was still whirling all ways at once in the old-fashioned street. After a long survey of the desolate landscape under its night aspect, she let the blind fall, took the letter which Helena had written downstairs, gave orders to the landlady that it was to be despatched by special messenger in the morning, and went again to Helena Shaldon's room, as she had promised her.

The young mistress had already fallen asleep, tired out with the fatigue of travelling, and of much excitement on her journey down to Chingford. Mrs. Graves's apartment was a room adjoining that of Miss Shaldon, and the old woman passed immediately to it, and returned with a heavy cloak across her arm, and her big bonnet swinging by its broad black strings.

She listened to the deep breathing of the sleeper, her hard face twitching with a strange emotion. A few words escaped her, spoken so loudly, too, that, had Miss Shaldon slept less heavily, they might have awakened her.

"Is it peace, or will she fret her life away in

this place, as she has almost done already? Heaven help her! This is one of the unlucky women, like Jane Graves."

She stooped and kissed her on the forehead, and Helena murmured in her sleep—

"Is that you, Jane?"

"Yes, it is I."

"No one has seen us, then—no one has watched us?" was faintly whispered.

"No one."

"That's well."

Helena Shaldon passed into a deep and less restless sleep, and Mrs. Graves opened the door carefully and noiselessly, changed the key from the inside to the outside, closed the door and locked it, removing the key, and dropping it into the depths of her pocket. On the landing-place without she put on her cloak and bonnet hurriedly, and went downstairs once more, like a spirit suffering from unrest.

"I shall not be long," she said to the landlady, a rosy-faced, broad-chested dame of some forty years; "I have purchases to make in the town."

"You will find the shops all closed, I think."

"I hope not."

“Is it anything that I can lend you till the morning?”

“No.”

“It’s a dreadful night—is there anything—”

But Mrs. Graves had not waited for any further conversation with the hostess of “The Bull Inn;” she had dived into the street, and turned in the direction of the dark country lanes in lieu of the town of which she had spoken. The driving snow met her, cold and fierce, but she did not bend her head in order to escape it. She went on peering keenly into the darkness, which the white lines of the storm crossed—a woman who expected to meet some one on the road.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MEETING IN THE SNOW.

MRS. GRAVES had no great distance to trudge through the snow before arriving at the object of her quest, but her journey was not the less uncomfortable. In homely phrase, it was not a night for a cat to be out. The snow came down in earnest, and the wind seemed surcharged with plaint and pain, as though it bore along with it the moanings of a whole city of afflicted.

A quarter of a mile along the snow-laden road, and Mrs. Graves was at her journey's end. He for whom she had ventured into the desperate night was waiting for her under the broad eaves of an outhouse, which might have been a barn, or a range of stabling, or the back of half-a-dozen wooden cottages for what could be seen of it in the darkness and through the

blinding snow-flakes. He had had some difficulty in finding shelter from the storm, for the snow was drifting all ways, and it was only by keeping his back close to the building, and by shuffling with his feet, that he avoided being buried to the knees. He was smoking a short clay pipe for comfort's sake, and was taking matters philosophically. One leg was crossed over the other; his hands were thrust into the depths of his coat-pockets: his felt hat was pulled over his ears and down to his eyebrows; his coat-collar was turned up to meet the rim of his hat, and there was little seen of him but the tip of his nose and some straggling hairs of his very long moustache. Mrs. Graves was for a moment under these circumstances somewhat doubtful of his identity, for she peered at him closely, and said in a sharp, quick tone, "Arthur?"

"Yes, it's Arthur. What a delightful night, Mrs. Graves!"

"Is this a season for scoffing?" she cried, in a sharp, quick tone of reproof.

"I don't know," he added, with a short laugh. "An old fellow in the town told me it was seasonable weather for the time of year, and he

ought to know best ; he has lived longer than I have. Hadn't you better stand against the wall—unless you are frightened of me?"

"I'm not frightened of you," said Mrs. Graves, accepting his invitation, after shaking some of the heavy snow from the shoulders of her cloak ; "no one ever frightened me."

"I'm a terrible fellow, too," he remarked, with another short laugh, that was peculiar at that time and place. "You know it ; she knows it ; a great many wiseacres in the world suspect it. You have a bad cough," he said, in a different and more kindly tone ; "how's that?"

"The cold has seized me. I shall get rid of it in a day or two," was the reply.

"Why did you insist upon my waiting for you here?" he asked. "Why could you not have told me all that I wanted to know in the parlour of 'The Bull Inn?'"

"There were eavesdroppers about."

"I have nothing to conceal," said he.

"But we have," replied Mrs. Graves ; "and you know it."

"I don't know it," said Arthur. "In her place I would have concealed nothing. In little

England there is no hiding anything for long; we come face to face with the objectionable before we are aware of it."

"Ay, that's true," muttered Mrs. Graves.

"Meaning that I am objectionable?" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Go on. I do not dispute the argument. Arthur Barclay is an objectionable fellow—idle, heartless, selfish, and cruel, in society's opinion; and, in this old woman's, something very much worse than that. Eh?"

He had taken his hand from his pocket, to rest it familiarly on the shoulder of the woman at his side, and he peered into her face for her answer with a certain amount of interest on his, which even the shadows about it did not wholly conceal.

"No, not worse than that, perhaps," she murmured.

"'Perhaps!' What a deal that 'perhaps' signifies!" he said. "Well, I am under a cloud—I submit. You are for Helena; she's everything to you, and I am nothing."

"She is all that is good—she has suffered much," said the woman, as if in extenuation. "You are a strong man."

“Bad men, they say, are weak,” he added, with careless levity, although a keen observer might have detected a touch of bitterness in his reply, “and I never could keep strong. When everybody’s hand is against a man, Mrs. Graves, there is a mighty strength in the force which thrusts him aside. You don’t object to my tobacco?”

Mrs. Graves looked hard at him, as if he were a man who puzzled her sorely, and then said—

“When I gave you that letter to-night, and you would have heaped upon me a hundred questions, I said that I would answer them here or not at all. I am here to reply to them, and not to listen to your maunderings.”

“Spoken like Mrs. Graves,” said Arthur; “and she was always a sensible and superior kind of woman. When I was a little boy of three years of age—a self-willed, fretful, pretty little chap—I thought so.”

A low moan escaped the woman.

“For mercy’s sake, speak to the purpose, and spare us both!” cried Mrs. Graves with excitement. “You were my master’s nephew, whom I loved then—whom alone I had to love in that strange house, and in my strange life.

I was a faithful friend and servant to you till—”

“Till Helena Shaldon came between us and enchanted you—this beauty whose face was her fortune !”

“What a fortune !” exclaimed Mrs. Graves ;
“poor miserable girl, what a fortune !”

“It was not to be despised.”

“She would give it away to-morrow for the happiness she lost in acquiring it.”

“Ah !” said Arthur, drily ; “she tells you that, and you are credulous. You believe in her ; I never did.”

“You never believed in anything,” remarked Mrs. Graves ; “and it is that curse which has made you what you are.”

“I have already intimated, Mrs. Graves, that you are a sensible and superior kind of woman ; but, for all that, I doubt if your perspicacity can determine what I am. I don’t know myself. I have tried to make myself out and failed.”

“What do you want with me ?” asked Mrs. Graves, shortly.

“To deliver a message from me to your young mistress—from the wretch Barclay to the peerless Helena,” he replied. “For twelve months

she has refused to see or hold communication with me. I terrify her. She hates me."

"Yes," said Mrs. Graves, in low assent.

"And it is I who should hate her; there is the anomaly, old lady."

"Go on," said Mrs. Graves, impatiently; "what more?"

"I promised to hold aloof for twelve months, and to make no effort to seek her out. I kept my word."

"And she has kept hers."

"Yes; but she would not see me to-night after all. She sent me down a letter instead, and owned that she was afraid to confront me."

"It is the truth."

"What a fiend I must be!" he muttered. "Or what a fiend it is her policy to make me out."

"She tries to think for the best," said Mrs. Graves.

"Do you help her?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"No matter in what way; I help her."

"Good old woman," he said; and here again his hand fell upon her shoulder familiarly and kindly. "Upon my word, I don't think you hate

me, after all : you and I are old friends, and there was a time when I came with all my sorrows to you, and you were a strong shield between myself and unhappiness. I didn't treat you well, Jane."

"No, you did not" she answered.

"And in return you did not treat me well."

"Heaven knows that that is false!" she cried.

"You believe all that your mistress tells you."

"I know her as I know my own heart," exclaimed Mrs. Graves, indignantly, "and hence I trust in her. If you have dragged me here to tell me over again——"

"Don't get excited—there's the mistake. You dragged me to this place, if you remember. Here is the letter," he said, producing a missive from his pocket; "and it contains—how much?"

"I don't know."

"Guess?"

"I don't wish to know."

"Guess?" he said again.

"A thousand pounds, perhaps," she said, thus compelled to reply.

"Ten thousand pounds—ten times as much

as I expected, or had a right to expect, considering her promise."

"So much as that," said Mrs. Graves, in a listless manner that showed the amount had not in any way surprised her; "I hope that you will do some good with it."

"I am not very sanguine as to what it will do," he said, returning the letter to his pocket; "there is an evil spell upon such money as this, Jane, and no good may come of it to me. Money will do her no good either, if there's any justice under heaven."

"Let us get back to the town," said the woman, shivering.

"I am going that way," he said, pointing along the country road. "I gave her my word that she should hear no more of me, and she believes that I will keep it. Why does she trust to my word, knowing what a wretch I am?"

"I cannot tell."

"Why has she no fear that I shall come back—that a year or two hence, when she is settled down, has made friends, has married—why does she not think of my return, to blast her new ambitions, as the villain of the play always

does, to slow music?" he asked, mockingly.

"I speak for you, Arthur," she replied. "I tell her she can trust you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Graves. Your most obedient servant to command," he said, taking off his felt hat, and making her a low bow, stepping forward into the snow even to go through his obeisance, with a great degree of mock solemnity. "Words fail to convey the proper sense of my eternal gratitude."

He pulled his hat over his brows again, and approached her again, with a new and sterner expression on his face; and the woman, strong-minded though she was, shrank from him for the first time, and cowered for an instant against the wall.

"Now tell her this for me," he said—"that she knows that she can trust me, and it is from no championship on your part that she does so. She knows how much of my life has been blighted by her interference, and that I despise her for it. I discredit her wholly, and the world's verdict is the verdict of my own heart."

"Oh! don't say that," cried Mrs. Graves; "you have no right to say it."

"Tell her also," he continued, in the same

hard tones, "that I do not thank her for her generosity, that I do not take her money as the price of my silence, and that I am not bribed to go away by her munificence. Had I seen my way, had there been a hope, a chance, even a dream elsewhere, I would sooner have touched fire than one penny of her money. I take it, but it is to my eternal shame."

"These are bitter words—I will not be your lackey to repeat them," she broke out, defiantly.

"Then I will repeat them myself."

He turned his face towards the town, and Mrs. Graves clutched him by the arm.

"I will tell her all," she said; "don't go back again."

"Very well," he answered; "I can trust your word, as Miss Shaldon can trust mine. And now, old friend, old servant of the house of Barclay, good-bye, and Heaven send you clearer judgment."

"Good-bye. Heaven send you, Arthur, that clearer judgment too, which it will in its own time, I pray."

She raised her hands to heaven, as though imploring it to bear witness to her prayer, and there was something intense and touching in

the rugged face looking upwards to the sky.

Thus they parted without another word, and, in the drifting snow, the old woman and the young man turned their backs upon each other.

CHAPTER V.

WEDDERCOMBE.

THE coming of Helena Shaldon to Chingford, and the purchase and possession of the Weddercombe estate, were items of a nine-days' wonder, which faded away before the leaves were green upon the trees. When it was Summer-time, Helena Shaldon was quite "an old inhabitant;" and, if the "landed gentry" were "stand-offish," and the wives of the "landed gentry" did not put themselves out of the way to cultivate Miss Shaldon's acquaintance, that young lady was all the more grateful for their reserve. She had come to Weddercombe for peace, as Jane Graves had told Mr. Whistleshaft one night last Winter; and, if peace had not come speedily, as she had almost hoped that it would, still there were rest and security. That little *coterie* of rich nobodies

living within twenty miles' circle of Weddercombe, and that called itself "society," talked about Miss Shaldon, but did not visit her—with one or two exceptions. The Rector of Chingford called occasionally, and the Rector's wife had been twice to Weddercombe; for Miss Shaldon was a liberal giver, and the poor of the village of Hernley, and of the adjacent and the more pretentious town of Chingford, had had reason to rejoice over her advent. Sir Charles Andison and Lady Andison had also honoured Miss Shaldon with a visit of ceremony, accompanied by their son, Mr. Percy Andison, who had seen Miss Shaldon at church, and desired to pay his respectful compliments; and Miss Shaldon had not returned the call. Mr. William Whistleshaft visited Weddercombe frequently in the early times, ostensibly on business to begin with, subsequently out of sheer anxiety concerning Miss Shaldon's health; after which he discovered that Miss Shaldon was not at home, or that she sent down her compliments, and was too busy to see him. As it was five miles from Chingford to Weddercombe, and Jane Graves's wooden features were only to be found at the end of the journey, Mr. Whistle-

shaft gave up an odd idea which he had allowed to nestle in the innermost recesses of his heart. He never owned that he was a vain man, not even to his sister, who kept house for him, and who was afraid that he was; but he had thought it possible that Miss Shaldon, coming into a strange place, might not find the acquaintanceship of a respectable, fresh-coloured—he was nearly saying good-looking—bachelor altogether disagreeable. He was not “a fellow who ran after the girls”—not he, indeed! He had had one or two good chances of securing a wife with a pretty face and some expectations—he was not going to dash into matrimony and make a fool of himself; but he felt that he should have liked to keep company with Miss Shaldon. In his homely but forcible phraseology, she was “tip-top,” and would have suited him. Unfortunately he did not suit Miss Shaldon; and at last he was of opinion that old mother Graves—as he disrespectfully termed a lady who, in his opinion, was far from “tip-top”—had done her best to disparage him in the eyes of her mistress. In the onward course of time there was no telling what might happen, though.

Untroubled by many visitors then, carrying out to the best of her ability and power the quiet life which she had planned, loving peace, becoming patient, possessing no ambition, resisting quietly but strongly the force of a past sorrow, which seemed to have isolated her from kith and kin, Helena Shaldon settled down at Weddercombe. Shut in by the trees, even submerged by them, the fair woman realised as much of happiness as she had anticipated would fall to her share. She had made up her mind to be content; she had taken to the place from her first accidental glimpse of it through the windows of her travelling carriage; she had had a nervous horror of society, and felt that she might escape it, and that here at last was home. Let them talk of her without its walls, and wonder who she was, and whence she came, and why this silent, solitary life seemed, despite her youth, to suit her best—it mattered not. Their comments, even their suspicions, would not reach her ears, and would scarcely affect her if they did. She was living for herself, not for them; and she was not naturally a restless or dissatisfied woman.

Still Weddercombe for a residence at all seasons of the year was far from conducive to

a cheerful frame of mind. It had been termed a shooting-box before Miss Shaldon had purchased it and transformed it into a lady's residence. It was an old-fashioned red-brick house, containing some twelve or fourteen rooms—not more—and lay back from the main road several hundred yards. A narrow and circuitous drive through a thick plantation led up to the house, which in the Summer-time was lost amongst the trees. There was a gamekeeper's lodge, half as large as the house itself, built of black old timber, and glistening with latticed windows, lying half a mile still deeper in the woodland; and here the servants of the great folk had been drafted in old times, when the house was full of company, and Colonel Chester's shooting party had mustered in more than fair proportion. From this lodge the gamekeepers had departed; the key had been turned upon it, the house was empty, and already wore a desolate look to the few who came across it. The game was left to itself, or to the poachers; no shooting was to be allowed in the preserves, Miss Shaldon had already intimated to those whom it might concern—Sir Charles Andison for one—and Weddercombe grew lonely, and

was oppressive in its loneliness to all save its possessor and the grim woman whom she had chosen for companion.

Still, as has been intimated, Helena Shaldon had made no mistake in her selection of a residence; there was that in its solitariness which pleased her, and time increased her satisfaction rather than diminished it. Looking upon her one bright morning in June, some six months after the sale of the property at "The Bull Inn," she appears a different being from the delicate girl whom Chingford had then encountered for the first time. She had worn mourning at that period, but of late days some flecks of colour had crept into her dress, with the deeper dye of health that had come back to her cheeks. The house stood upon a grass plat, which had been made bright with standard roses and huge stone vases full of geraniums and fuchsias—a patch of garden ground belted round by the plantation from which it had been snatched. The windows of the drawing-room opened upon the lawn, or rather upon a green bank which sloped down to the lawn, and the light dance-music which was being rattled off skilfully from the piano within, and which escaped in a pleasant

flow of melody to the Summer air without, was tolerably significant of the spirit of the player. The listener thought so; for there was an intruder upon the Weddercombe estate that morning, and neither old Baynard, at the entrance gates—the warder of the place—nor Mrs. Graves, grim custodian of the inner sanctum, was aware of this invasion of the territory. She—for the intruder was of the feminine gender—had come her own way to the establishment, and was now standing with a hand on one of the stone vases, listening with rapt interest to the music. In the sunshine which fell upon the place that morning, and filled it with light and brightness, the listener seemed to belong to the picture, and form part of it.

She was a pretty blonde of eighteen years of age, with a ripple of golden hair that was all her own, and did not take its colour from New Bond Street, and with two large violet eyes, which were very striking and uncommon, appertaining as they did to a girl who was wondrously fair. They gave life to the face, and relieved it from that insipidity which will at times mar beauty of this class. It was a happy-looking face, that was deserving of more than a passing

glance ; and, as she listened to the music from within the house, the interest, and the smiles born of the pleasure which the music gave her, added in no small degree to the charm of its expression.

How long this young lady, who was so elaborately costumed for the country that she might have stepped out of a plate of French fashions, would have remained there listening it is impossible to record, had not the music suddenly ceased, and the player, with a marvellous rapidity of action, stood at the open window, her hands parting aside the lace curtains, so that she could see more clearly into the garden. The brunette regarded the blonde with a well-bred air of suspicion ; and then Helena Shaldon came down the green bank and confronted her unexpected visitor.

“I am afraid that you have mistaken the house,” she said, calmly and courteously.

“No, I have not,” answered the fair girl ; “you are Miss Shaldon. I am Miss Andison—haven’t you heard of me ? Has not papa, or mamma, or Percy, or anybody, told you of my existence ? Oh, that’s too bad ; but it’s just like them, and so here am I left to introduce myself

before I can get nice and friendly and neighbour-like with you. Well, I am Miss Andison, and I hope you will not scold me for taking you unawares in this unconventional fashion. I hate ceremony between girls—don't you, now?"

It was a rapid outpouring of words, and her volubility was another surprise to Helena Shaldon, although she could not refrain from smiling at it.

"I came home last night," she said, before Helena could reply: "I have been travelling with my aunt on the Continent—haven't you heard of that either?"

Miss Shaldon had not received that piece of information, and was about to say as much, when Miss Andison darted off again.

"Of course you haven't, if you haven't heard of me before. What a silly I am!" she cried. "But you must not mind that, Miss Shaldon. This is a kind of place where the intellect does not expand half so much as the mangold-wurzel. I hate Hernley Hall, and Weddercombe, and Chingford, and all those slow old places, full of slow old fogies and grave old dowagers, who either give you the horrors or make you die of laughter at them. I like town—Belgravia, Rot-

ten Row, concerts, balls, and the Opera. Oh, the Opera, isn't that jol—sublime?"

She pursed her lips at this slip of the tongue, although she had corrected herself almost in time. Miss Shaldon did not appear to regard it. Helena had hardly recovered from the surprise of her visitor, and scarcely knew in which way to respond. The girl's flow of spirits and flow of language, her total unconsciousness that she was doing anything out of the common way, and her complete disregard of conventional rule, amused rather than vexed Helena. It was an outburst of vigorous life upon her own quiet existence, and she scarcely objected to it. There was something pleasing and original about the girl that attracted her and aroused her curiosity. Sir Charles and Lady Andison she had almost disliked at first sight, and their son Percy was a dreamy, reserved young man, who stared at her, and kept his mouth shut; but this was an object of interest that she had not credited Hernley Hall with possessing.

"I am not fond of town life, and society is objectionable to me," said Helena, in reply.

"At your age?" cried Miss Andison.

"Yes, at my age."

“I cannot understand that—perhaps you’ll tell me all about it though,” said Miss Andison—“when we are better friends of course, and you can feel that you can tell me anything. I’m not much of a gabbler,” she added, with inelegant frankness; “and, if you don’t care to tell me, I shall never ask you. I’m not a Paul Pry either. Oh, how I hate Paul Pry! There was an old cat of a teacher at my school in Paris—— But there, that’s a long story, and we need not talk about it now. Can’t we sit down somewhere, Miss Shaldon? I have walked across country to get at you, and I am rather tired.”

“Will you step into the drawing-room for a moment?”

“For half an hour—if you can put up with me for so long,” she added, with the sudden conviction seizing her that she might be considered a bore before that period of time had elapsed. “When I tire you, tell me to go, or give me a hint that I am in the way—I shan’t mind in the least. I wished to see you very much—and here I am. That’s the story.”

They went up the sloping bank, and into the room which Helena had recently quitted. The

fair girl was a keen observer in her way, for she pointed to an oval mirror above the piano, and laughed very pleasantly and musically.

“That’s how you saw me: I hope I did not look too much like a ghost, Miss Shaldon, and scare you?”

“No,” said Miss Shaldon, thoughtfully; “I am not easily scared now.”

When they were seated, facing each other, endeavouring, perhaps, under their long eyelashes, to “make each other out,” Helena Shaldon said very quietly,

“You wished to see me. May I ask why?”

“I heard that you were of my own age—that you had purchased this shooting-box, and were living here all alone, and that you were very beautiful. Why, it was a romance to begin with!”

“You are at a romantic age.”

“Well, so are you, for that matter,” was the quiet response.

“Oh! I am much older than you, child,” said Helena.

“I am eighteen.”

“I am nineteen,” said Helena, with intense gravity, as befitted her superior years, “and

naturally old-fashioned. I have come to Weddercombe to live in peace, and away from society, and the curious people of which it is composed."

"I hope that is not a hit at me," said Miss Andison, frankly; "though I have been a little curious."

"If I have not realised your expectations," said Helena, with the faintest ring of satire in her tone, "you must lay the blame on those who have foolishly aroused your curiosity."

"Percy sketched you pretty accurately, though," said the Baronet's daughter, thoughtfully, in her turn; "and I am not disappointed in you in the least."

"You are an outspoken girl, or affect to be so—I hardly know which," said Helena, very calmly; "and it is as well to speak out, in my turn, so that we may understand each other at once. I have no story to tell; always consider me a woman who is without one, and who will be ever the most indebted to those who leave her most to herself."

Miss Andison rose immediately, and held out a dainty little hand in its grey kid glove to her.

"I told you to give me a hint when I was in the way, and I have got it. Good morning."

“Good morning, Miss Andison,” said Helena, rising also.

At the French window, and after the two young women had shaken hands together, Miss Andison stopped suddenly again.

“I am afraid that I have made a bad impression upon you by this unceremonious visit,” said she, regarding Helena attentively; “but I dislike formality, and thought—I hardly know why—that I might be natural here.”

There was so wistful a look in the violet eyes, that Helena Shaldon softened at once.

“Pray do not apologise; I do not require it,” she said, hurriedly.

“When they spoke of you last night, I thought to myself, ‘Why, here’s another friend for me—some one I shall like, and who will like me, as everybody else does.’ This is not the first time that I have seen you, you must know,” she added.

The colour that of late days had stolen to Helena Shaldon’s cheeks left them on the instant, and was replaced by a greenish pallor. The dark eyes dilated, and had a look of surprise, almost of horror, in them; and, standing at the window again in their parting, as in their

first meeting, Helena's hands clutched at the lace curtains, as if even their frail support were better than nothing in that moment of her consternation.

"Not the first time—that you have—seen me!" she whispered, almost to herself.

"I have seen a drawing that was made of you in church some weeks ago, and it is very like you."

The colour went back to the cheeks—more of it than was necessary, for it overflowed to brow and throat, reddening them both.

"That was a liberty—an irreverent and foolish one!" she cried.

"Worthy of the irreverent and foolish fellow who sketched it," added Miss Andison. "Yes, I am quite of your opinion there. Good day again, Miss Shaldon."

"Good day."

Miss Andison went slowly along the garden walk towards the carriage drive, having evidently made up her mind to return home in a more orthodox fashion than she had left it. She walked on very pensively and a little crestfallen at the poor result of her visit, and the dark-haired lady of Weddercombe watched her till

the turn of the drive took her from view. A heavy sigh escaped her then, and the touch of a hand upon her shoulder made her start. It was Mrs. Graves who had stolen to her side.

"Company?" said the elder woman, inquiringly.

"Yes—company."

"I saw her from the window of my room. A bird of gay plumage, wasn't she?" she added, a little scornfully.

"Bright with colour, as youth should be," answered Helena.

"Who was she?"

"Miss Andison."

"A daughter of the Baronet over yonder?"

"Yes."

"What did she want?"

"To dash at me for a friend, as a boy dashes at a butterfly," said Helena, with a sad smile—"to read my heart as she reads her last novel from the library. My heart, Jane—you hear?"

"The paltry curiosity of the high-bred!" cried Jane Graves.

"Yes—possibly."

"You sent her away with the conviction that she was not wanted?"

"Yes," said Helena, sadly.

Mrs. Graves looked hard into the face of the young mistress, and said, quickly,

"You don't regret it—you know how much for the best it is that you should stand aloof from all of them?"

"I know it, Jane, but I may regret it for all that," was the reply.

"Why?"

"She was of my own age—one who spoke from the heart and seemed to have an interest in me—a girl I could have learned to like in time, unless my first impression has deceived me."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Graves, jealously, "it is as I thought. The life is getting weary, and I am wearying you along with it."

"Don't think that," was the reply. "You are the one friend who believes in me, and so God bless you, Jane."

"No, no, young mistress but true friend, let me rather say God bless you instead. It will be the prayer more likely to be heard," said the woman, almost passionately.

"Are prayers ever heard, I wonder?" was the strange, sceptical question, as the girl

sat down and clasped her hands together.

"Yours and mine were a little while ago ; remember that."

"I had forgotten for the moment," said Helena, shuddering.

"You are unwell ; this visit has disturbed you. It is as it always is," cried Mrs. Graves, "when strangers will not let you be. Try to rest, Helena, on the couch."

"No ; to rest is to think, and I don't want to think before the night comes. I will go on with my music."

She made an impulsive dash at the ivory keys of the piano, and resumed the waltz from which the coming of Miss Andison had disturbed her. But it was an ineffectual attempt—a defiance of the probabilities, which ended in discomfiture. She was very weak at times, and she gave way and bowed her head over the keys in a sudden fit of despair until the old woman put her arms round her, and kissed her in her grief, as her mother might have done.

"Courage, Helena," she murmured ; "we have got over the worst now."

CHAPTER VI.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

MISS ANDISON continued her thoughtful progress along the carriage drive, walking very slowly, and beating her closed parasol against the silk skirt of her dress as she proceeded. The interview with the proprietress of Weddercombe had not been more satisfactory to her than to Helena Shaldon; she had anticipated a different result—she had left Hernley Hall that morning prophesying it. He to whom she had prophesied it laughingly was waiting for her in the high road beyond the lodge gates—a slim, sallow-faced young man, with a small, dark moustache, small, piercing black eyes, and with long black hair, from which some inches might have been cut with advantage to his general appearance. As he walked

up and down the road, with his hands behind him, and his gaze directed to the dusty roadway, he might have been taken for a German professor, deep in the study of matters abstruse and ponderous. He advanced eagerly towards Miss Andison as she opened the gate, and, as she passed through, the head of Mr. Baynard, lodge-keeper and gardener, poked itself round the door of his cottage, and looked after her with amazement.

"Well, Floy, you have seen her?" was the young man's first question.

"Yes, and spoken to her, Percy," was the reply. "I have had a long talk, in fact, but it has been all on my side."

"It was a madcap adventure, Floy," said Percy Andison, "and I knew no good would come of it."

"I don't say any harm has come of it," was the half-laughing answer. "I told you, and papa and mamma, that I should see the fair mystery for myself—that I should storm the enchanted castle and 'interview' the enchantress."

"Whom you have offended?"

"N-o, I don't think I have," said Florence,

half-hesitatingly. "She laughed once or twice with me, or at me, and we got on pretty well together till towards the end of the conference."

"And then?"

"Oh, then she cooled off awfully."

"She became reserved, you mean."

"Yes, if you like that way of putting it better—she became reserved," said Florence, mimicking a certain pedantic method of expression that was natural to her brother.

"Well, tell me all about it," he said, impatiently.

Florence Andison dashed into a full and somewhat highly-coloured account of the interview, and, though the young lady was evidently fond of narrative, and overwhelmed her little incident with an amplitude of detail concerning the dress, deportment, and general appearance of Miss Shaldon, her brother listened with respectful attention to every word.

"Ah! you have offended her," he observed, with a sigh that he was unable to repress—an odd and forcible sigh that told his case expressively.

Florence laughed pleasantly again, and even very unceremoniously tapped him on the back with her parasol.

“My dear, dreamy, old-fashioned boy, have you been studying yourself to death all these years for no other end than to fall in love with a girl whom you know nothing about, and concerning whose antecedents nobody else knows?” she cried.

“In love? Nonsense, Floy; you should know me better than that,” he said, reddening a little, and taking off his hat to breathe more freely, and as if the weight of it were oppressive to him.

“You deny it, then?”

“Deny it? To be sure I do,” he answered; “I have never spoken half a dozen words to Miss Shaldon, and I consider it unfair of you, Floy, to attribute my interest in her—I do not deny my interest—to a foolish and unworthy sentimentalism.”

“Ah! I know,” said his sister, nodding her head once or twice emphatically, in response to this energetic protest.

“Because I took her part last night against what, I repeat, are my mother’s ungenerous suspicions—because I said that no lady is bound to furnish her neighbours with credentials as to her birth and position—because I said that she

was good, and kind, and liberal to the poor, who already understand her better than we do, and because, when you asked me what she was like, I said that she was very beautiful, am I to be laughed at, Floy, and is your romantic imagination to construct a love-story from these slender materials? Girls of your age cannot think of anything else but love, upon my honour!" he cried, with considerable energy.

"All right," said Florence, demurely; "I won't chaff you any more."

"Florence, will you allow me, in all brotherly affection, to repeat again that I detest slang."

"It's very fashionable."

"I loathe and despise it. It's a sign of——"

"I'm breaking myself of it by degrees. I think it's Val's fault," she said. "I like to imitate him in everything, you know."

"I had a letter from Val this morning."

"Does he know that I am back in England? Does he talk of coming down to Hernley? What does he say? Is there anything so very improper in one man's letter to another that you can't show it me?" she added, petulantly.

"And 'Haven't I a right to see it?' you should have added," said Percy, with a smile,

as he produced a letter from his breast-pocket.
“There it is, Florence.”

Percy Andison had succeeded very skilfully in turning the conversation from a subject that was embarrassing to himself; he had played his cards well, and, after all, seemed more than a match for his sister. He knew that a letter from Valentine Merrick would be everything to little Floy; that in her travels on the Continent she had not forgotten his friend, who had made himself even a year ago so very agreeable to her that Sir Charles Andison had interfered, and spoken his mind plainly, and nearly crushed a first affection remorselessly in the bud. Sir Charles had said that his daughter was too young to know her own mind, and that Valentine Merrick might have known better, and waited a longer period, and, in fact, said and done a hundred wiser things; and Valentine Merrick, a man of good family with a little property and a great deal of pride, had said that he would keep away for twelve months, to give fair play to Miss Andison, and show his own disinterestedness and his faith in her; and so the twelvemonths had rolled away, and Florence Andison was back in her father's house.

Very attentively, and with a heightened colour, she read the letter which her brother had given her. Her hands shook a little, and she turned aside as they walked on, so that her brother should not perceive her agitation.

“He is coming, then?” she murmured, at last.

“Yes.”

“And you haven’t given him a hint of the time that I’m likely to be back—not a hint, Percy?”

“Well, I might have said——”

“Oh! you cannot hide the truth from me—it always pops out of your mouth, or prints itself in big capitals on your open countenance!” she cried. “And he does not decline, or plead any pressing engagement, but says how happy he will be to come.”

“Which means——”

“Yes, I think I know what it means,” she added, looking down in some confusion, and yet looking very happy.

They went on side by side together in silence, until the great gates of Hernley Hall were reached, and the distant mansion was seen upon the higher ground beyond—a house that a prince might have inhabited without looking

particularly shabby. When they were approaching the house, Florence turned to her brother again.

"Percy, you and I have been great chums in our time," she said, suddenly.

"Two children together, the only two—yes," said Percy; "and we became inseparables in consequence."

"We did not have any secrets from each other; you were always more like a great girl than a boy, weren't you, Percy?"

"Florence, you should not talk like that; it isn't fair."

"Well, you are not a man till next week, at all events," she said, "and I cannot keep a secret for the life of me. I don't want to deny that I like Val Merrick just as well as ever I did, and that if he likes me as well, why, I shall think twenty thousand times more of him before the month is out. And he wouldn't talk of coming again, and at once, without he was as true and as constant as I knew he always would be from the first."

"He's a noble fellow; he's my *beau-ideal* of manly honour, Floy."

"Not that I want him to know all that I tell

you, Percy," she said, quietly; "let him find the truth out for himself."

"To be sure."

"And it approaches——"

"And he approaches through a haze of golden glory, like the sun," said Percy, half-jestingly.

"How poetical we are!" said Florence; "and yet we are not in love!"

"No."

"I told Miss Shaldon that you had sketched her in church, and she said that it was irreverent and foolish, and——"

"Oh! Floy, Floy, you have never been so indiscreet as that!" cried Percy. "You have spoiled everything by your indiscretion; you have made me look an idiot in her eyes, or a fast wretch that has sent you to her with a—with a—with a shallow pretence of——"

"And you are not in love with Miss Shaldon!" said Florence, interrupting him. "And I, a sensible girl, with a perfect knowledge of all the symptoms, am called upon to believe your statement! There, boy, leave it to me!"

"Leave what to you?" gasped forth Percy, indignantly.

"Leave it to me to bring it all round beauti-

fully," she said, with confidence ; "to coax Miss Shaldon from her hermitage—to make a friend of her—to make her your friend. I have seen her, and I like her for myself. In the haze of golden glory, my poetic brother, I see her coming too."

CHAPTER VII.

VALENTINE MERRICK.

THERE was a flutter of excitement next day amongst the inmates of Hernley Hall; for Mr. Valentine Merrick, of the Inner Temple, had taken the trouble, or the precaution, to telegraph to Mr. Percy Andison that he was on his way towards him, and that the train due at Chingford at 4.50 p.m. would, the Fates permitting, land him amongst old friends. It was great news, this coming of the barrister before his time, and each member of the worthy family received it after his or her fashion, and each was far from stoical.

Valentine Merrick's advent foreshadowed a great change—the beginning of a new life to one at least of that grand establishment—and all the Andisons were aware of this, and were glad or sorry according to their respective natures.

There was no mistaking the fact that Valentine Merrick had set aside his briefs in a busy time of the season, and was coming down to court Miss Florence Andison. He had shown his patience and perseverance and pluck by waiting twelve months—by taking Sir Charles Andison's advice, and submitting to his parental authority—by acting honourably and straightforwardly and trustfully, with confidence in himself and the "bit of a girl" whose head he had turned and whose heart he had touched when he was last at Hernley.

She had not known her own mind last year, Sir Charles had affirmed; but the starchy Baronet was wrong, for his daughter had clung to her first impressions with a tenacity that even Continental travelling, with her aunt as escort, had had no power to affect. Had Sir Charles Andison been less exacting, the result might have been more satisfactory, supposing that he had not cared for Mr. Merrick, or had wished to keep his only daughter at Hernley for a few years longer. A year's separation was an ordeal, but there was something romantic about it to a "seventeen year;" it was a match between constancy and time; there was a story in it—almost

a plot—and the characters were a clever young fellow, a fair maiden, a father as stern as the heavy parent of the last heavy play, and a mother who had hoped for a great alliance, and considered young barristers to be as speculative commodities as young curates or young doctors. They might be full grown presently, but, in the early days of their fledglessness, it behoved well-to-do people to keep guard over their marriageable daughters.

Certainly Valentine Merrick came with credentials of more than ordinary force. He had been a big boy at Eton when Percy was a little one, and he had taken care of Percy, and been his friend. They had never completely lost sight of each other. Despite the six years' difference of age between them, Val Merrick had always been Percy's hero. Sir Charles Andison had known Merrick's father, and had admired Merrick's mother, too, before she was married, and in his own impressionable days. The young barrister came of a good family, and his father had left him seven or eight hundred a year; and it was prophesied in the profession that Val was one of the men who would rise—Val Merrick being clever and energetic, a man on whom

solicitors relied already in cases requiring brains and judgment, and whom old stagers at the Bar were glad to get as junior counsel.

“He will be a great man,” cried Percy; and Valentine Merrick’s mother was precisely of the same opinion, it may be recorded at once. Florence Andison had not a doubt of this also, though her experience of the Bar was limited to the fact that Val hid his chestnut hair under a horsehair wig; Sir Charles thought it not wholly improbable; Lady Andison had not thought about it. That estimable lady had no theories; she looked at the world as it was. Valentine Merrick had seven or eight hundred a year, and it was a poor and paltry amount in the estimation of an Andison.

“I shouldn’t have married you on that,” she said very frankly to her lord and husband as they sat after luncheon talking the matter over together.

“No, it would not have been wise,” her husband assented. “But I am afraid that we have gone too far, and that there is no stopping this love business.”

“My own opinion is, Sir Charles, that you do not want to stop it.”

"I don't know that I do," said Sir Charles, reflectively; "though I don't want to part with Floy yet awhile—though I don't intend to part with her. If she likes him, and if he likes her, I can't see, my dear, exactly what else is to be done but give our consent. It is not a great match; but he's a gentleman, and there's no telling what a son-in-law we may have to be proud of one of these days."

"I shall not interfere," said Lady Andison—"clearly understand that I shall not interfere in any way, Sir Charles."

"Ahem!—no—exactly."

Sir Charles Andison's private opinion was that his better half interfered with everything and everybody, but he did not express it just then. He was a man who loved peace as a rule, though he could put himself out, and assert his authority and his position, when anything particularly displeased him, or touched that pride of which he had an excellent stock on hand. A year since he had taken offence at the love-making that had gone on under his very nose, and had been startled by Valentine Merrick's formal proposal for his daughter; he had trusted in time to put an end to a silly flirtation, and to

Valentine and Florence forgetting each other. Having borne each other in remembrance, he was too fond of his girl to continue in opposition ; Floy must not be unhappy, and Valentine might come to Hernley Hall and speak up like a man, if he liked.

His eldest son—the heir to his house—the studious, pale-faced, half-disposed-to-be-round-shouldered Percy—was glad of Val Merrick’s coming too. There was no disguising his satisfaction ; he was full of suppressed excitement and exultation ; he set his books and studies and collections aside, along with that thoughtful deep-down expression which was natural to his countenance, and against which Sir Charles had protested more than once, feeling perfectly assured in his own mind that Percy could alter his “ woe-begones ” if he pleased.

“What a difference Val will make in the place!” cried Percy. “How he will brighten everything up! What a deal he will have to tell us! Had I not better be off now? It’s a long drive to Chingford.”

“It’s about five miles,” said Sir Charles, dryly.

“Yes, but I don’t want to drive Tom and Topsy too fast ; the atmosphere is warm, and

I am not a good hand with the reins. I think I'll go, sir, unless you want the ponies this afternoon?"

"I shall not require them," said his father.

Percy Andison drove away, and his sister Florence watched him down the stately avenue from the window of her room, whence it is probable that she would be peeping at the time of his return. She was excited, nervous, almost eccentric that day, but only her maid was aware of the fact. "Floy is very thoughtful," Sir Charles had said to himself; "she either hesitates, or she's over head and ears in love with the barrister. I suppose it's the latter; and, if so, by Gad, she shall have him!"

Meanwhile his son, with the groom in the back seat, upright and trim and wooden-visaged, drove into Chingford in style, and was treated with becoming reverence, and saluted with much cap-doffing by the worthy townfolk. Percy Andison was shortsighted, and did not respond to half the courtesies with which Chingford received him, and had not the groom, after his custom, given warning now and then in a deep bass, he would have scarcely reached the railway station with-

out loss of infantine life, which invariably courted danger in Chingford by rolling in the middle of the road.

He was at Chingford station three quarters of an hour before time ; so he gave the reins to the groom, descended, and went into the little booking-office, out of the sun. He sat down and read from a pocket edition of Lucretius till the train was signalled approaching, when he got up in a hurry and left Lucretius on the seat, where it was found by a little boy, who sold it afterwards in the town for threehalfpence.

The train had scarcely stopped at the platform when Valentine Merrick leaped out and grasped the hands of his friend. It was a forcible greeting between two young men whose diverse pursuits had set them apart in life, but who had a natural liking for each other, and there was much hand-shaking and pleasant welcoming and that natural hearty laughter which is getting as scarce now-a-days as Wallsends.

Valentine Merrick was hardly a handsome man, but he was a man at whom most folk looked twice. There was something out of the common way about him—some of the shrewdness and cleverness with which the world had

credited him was evident upon his countenance. No one would have taken him for a simpleton with that broad massive forehead, and the large, gray, piercing eyes beneath it ; and not a little of the energy of his character was expressed by the firm chin and the clear-cut mouth, over which no moustache acted as a veil. His whiskers were small and fair, and of complexion he had little ; he had ground it down to a drabby white by hard study in his rooms and hard work in the murky atmosphere of law courts. The air of Chingford and Hernley would give him a healthier colour presently, which in town he would quickly lose again ; but, as far as constitution went, Val Merrick was as strong as a lion. He was a man above the middle height, broad-chested and muscular, with a mass of brown hair that seemed curling and twisting fifty ways at once under the broad brim of his deer-stalker.

He was certainly a shrewd man, with a capital memory. He forgot nothing ; he brought his umbrella out of the carriage, and a small bag that looked as if it had business papers within it—which it had—and he reminded the porter that there were a hat-case and a fishing-rod, as

well as a portmanteau, to be disinterred from the luggage-van before he ventured to depart. He was liberal with his tip to the railway-servant who looked after his luggage, for the man said "Thank you" very heartily, and remained in a chronic state of hat-touching until Val had been driven away. The latter took a comprehensive view of his property in the back of the four-wheeler and by the side of the man in livery before he settled down to Percy Andison's society.

"Will you drive, Val?" asked Percy. "I think you like——"

"Of course I like!" cried his friend, seizing the reins. "It gives me an idea of power and property, and it affords you an opportunity of dozing off in Dickens's fat boy style."

"I am not as sleepy as I used to be."

"More wide awake, eh, Percy?" said Merrick. "With an eye to what is passing in the world, which is a greater study than geology, astronomy, and mathematics, and harder to become a master of? Tom and Topsy pull a bit—they're too fresh; we must take the impudence out of them to-morrow, Percy."

"You remember their names?" said Percy, laughing.

"Yes, and why we christened them, from Mrs. Beecher Stowe's novel, and who christened them with mock formality and much form. She is well, I hope?"

"Florence is very well, thank you, Val."

"At Hernley?"

"Yes—at Hernley?"

"That's all right. It's like driving back to the old times, and kicking the last twelve months into the ditch by the wayside," said Val.

"That is rather hard on the last year," observed Percy.

"Serve it right."

"And yet you have been successful in it," said Percy, reproachfully.

"Yes, and I am not ungrateful. Oh! Time, bring the old year out of the slough of despond, and rub it down carefully—I didn't mean to serve a faithful friend like this!"

He was in high spirits, and Percy participated in them; it was a merry couple bowling along towards the Baronet's house through the fair green English landscape which lay on either side of them. After a few inquiries as to the health of Sir Charles and Lady Andison on the

part of Valentine, and after a question or two as to the health of Mrs. Merrick, Valentine, who had been regarding Percy steadily, said,

“You have improved, old boy! By Jove! you have improved!”

“In good looks?” asked Percy, lightly.

“Hang it! you never had any of them,” said his friend as lightly in return; and then, after another ringing laugh had been exchanged, Valentine Merrick explained himself more clearly. “You have lost that heavy, brooding look; you are not half as absent as you used to be—you actually listen to all that a fellow tells you,” said Merrick. “Ten to one you don’t study so hard!”

“Possibly not. My father tells me that I do; but then he would make a Centaur of me, and have me always on horseback for my liver’s sake.”

“And there’s nothing in Chingford, or Hernley, or Weddercombe, or anywhere, which has taken off the twenty-five per cent. of neutral tint?”

“Nothing, Val.”

“Then your liver’s better—there’s not a doubt of it!” cried Val. “And, talking of

Weddercombe, how's Colonel Chester—red-hot, peppery, explosive Chester? Do you remember how I aggravated the old beggar about his shooting once?"

"Yes, I remember. But Colonel Chester is dead."

"Poor old boy! Is he, though?" said Merrick, more thoughtfully. "And I have been wondering in the train what he would say to me if I met him at your father's table. Who has Weddercombe?—Sir Charles?"

"Sir Charles wanted it, but it was bought over his head."

"By an enviable neighbour, who will allow me to fish in that trout stream which runs at the back of the gamekeeper's cottage. All the big trout get there—haven't you noticed it, Percy?"

"I never fish."

"You shall come and see me—that is, if this neighbour——"

"Miss Shaldon."

"What, an old maid! Heaven and earth, an old maid at Weddercombe! What does she want there?"

"She is a young woman, Val, very bright and

beautiful, with a glimpse of the angel in her eyes."

"Have you been looking very closely after the angel in them, then, you rascal?" cried Valentine. "Come, tell us all about Miss Shaldon—

Who is her father ?

How is her mother ?

Has she a sister,

And a very big brother ?"

"If you rattle on like this, I shall not tell you anything—and it's a down-right romantic mystery," said his friend.

"Oh ! confound it ; and I have come to Hernley Hall to escape mystery—the great mystery of the law, and the law's victims. Plaintiff and defendant, prosecutor and the prisoner at the bar, are the victims, of course—that is, between you and me, understand, but don't let it go any farther."

Percy smiled, but essayed to change the conversation. He pointed to a corn-field flushed with the golden promise of the next month's harvest, and said something about the crops which the farmer was likely to have ; but Valentine Merrick simply nodded and said,

“But this Miss Shaldon?”

“Well,” said Percy, reluctantly returning to the subject, “she has been here about six months. She is very good and kind to the poor; she is very beautiful, and she lives at Weddercombe. That’s all.”

“I don’t see any great degree of mystery in that.”

“The mystery lies in so young a woman living at Weddercombe—shutting up her youth in that melancholy, miserable place, preferring a companionless existence to that society which she would adorn so well.”

“Alone there?” said Val Merrick, thoughtfully. “Do you mean quite alone?”

“Yes, with the exception of a servant or two, and an ugly old woman for housekeeper.”

“How old is she?”

“Eighteen or nineteen.”

“And very plain, you say?”

“Plain! I said that she was very beautiful.” said Percy, indignant at this.

“Ah, I see what has brightened you up a bit,” said Valentine dryly; “it’s the tender passion which has touched the heart and shaken the liver of this dry old stick beside me. You must

introduce me to Miss Shaldon. When will this paragon of female loveliness be at Hernley?"

"She never visits—she never receives visitors."

"How then——"

"We have seen her at church—we meet her at times in the village. Floy called there yesterday, out of curiosity, and got snubbed tremendously."

"Was she not glad to see Floy?"

"Not a bit."

"Hang it, I can't understand that!" said Valentine indignantly. "This Miss Shaldon must be a person of bad tone and vile taste—a retired publican's daughter perhaps—publicans make a heap of money, you know."

Percy would not dwell any longer on this topic. He insisted upon talking about the crops, and Valentine Merrick let him have his own way, and became interested, or appeared to be, in the probable yield of the harvest.

"It is a little odd," said the barrister, as they turned into the broad avenue leading to Hernley Hall.

"What is odd? That this field should grow more quarters of corn than——"

"No. It is a little odd that a girl of nineteen

should shut herself up in Weddercombe. There must be a reason for it—it is not a fancy.”

“Never mind,” said Percy restlessly. “You will hear enough of that from Florence and my mother. I can only see that Helena Shaldon has a perfect right to do as she pleases.”

“Certainly ; and——Helena, did you say?”

“Yes, Helena. There’s nothing odd about that name, surely?”

“It’s a pretty name ; I like it,” said Merrick, somewhat thoughtfully again.

“Perhaps you liked a Helena too, once upon a time?” cried Percy jestingly.

“No ; but once upon a time there was a certain Helena who——”

“Who——?” repeated Percy, as he paused for consideration, or checked himself abruptly.

“Who made eyes at Percy Andison, and turned him from stone to life—it’s a softening process you will read of in mythology. Oh, here’s home!” cried he as they drew up before the stately entrance of Hernley Hall ; “for it’s like coming home again to see this place. I said a year ago,” he added, with a touch of firmness in his tone, “that I would be here this very day, and I am no false prophet.”

CHAPTER VIII.

FRANKLY.

VALENTINE MERRICK'S reception by the head of the house of Andison was completely satisfactory. He had had a doubt in his own mind as to how he would be received, for he had written to Percy and invited himself to Hernley with the freedom of one who felt assured of his welcome, although he was not *quite* certain what Sir Charles would say to him. The old gentleman had been angry at their last meeting, twelve months ago, and had said, "A year hence you will be sorry for this—a year hence you and my daughter will not care a straw for each other;" and there was Valentine Merrick back to disprove the force of argument on his side, and to hope for the best as regarded the lady.

He was uncommonly sanguine. Percy would have written and asked him to keep away had affairs been unfavourable; Sir Charles would have surely dropped a stiff line or two to the same effect, winding up with "I told you how it would be." But no one had set a barrier in the way of his coming, and there were no enemies to confront. He had formed his estimate of Florence Andison's character a year back, and believed in her firmness and courage. He had not been deceived; they would all be glad to see him back at Hernley.

Sir Charles bowed over the barrister's hand as a gentleman of the ruffles and pigtail school of etiquette might have done, and said, "Welcome, Mr. Merrick!" as if he meant what he was saying; and in the friendly salutation Valentine knew that all was well. Sir Charles had never disliked him; on the contrary, he had taken to him as a friend of his own as well as Percy's, until the impressionable Florence had alarmed her father with fears of a hasty and repentant match. Sir Charles had not been quite certain that Valentine knew his own mind, and he was sure that his daughter did not; and, like a wise parent, he had stepped between them and cried

“Time!” Now, with twelve months for reflection, the picture was set in a new light, and the Baronet thought that he could trust both of them. At all events, let them meet, and see if they liked each other still; if they did, he would be proud of his clear-headed, quick-witted son-in-law, whom he would see in judge’s ermine some day. Valentine was very clever—everybody said so. Better that his daughter should marry a clever fellow than an addle-pated nobody with thousands of acres of land and not half an inch of intelligence. He was not sorry for the result; he was almost sure now that Florence would be happy with Valentine Merrick, and that was everything. And, if the worst came to the worst, why, there was money enough in the Andison coffers, to advance the Merrick interest, put Valentine into Parliament, and float him towards prosperity.

“The ladies are dressing for dinner, Mr. Merrick,” Sir Charles explained, as a quick glance of the grey eyes took in everything within half-a-dozen yards of him. “They will be happy to receive you in the drawing-room presently, I am sure. Jones, show Mr. Merrick to his room.”

Valentine followed a stately footman of six feet two—a prize footman, with two of the best calves in the county—who led the way upstairs; and a few minutes afterwards the barrister was alone with his portmanteau and his other belongings.

He flung himself into a capacious arm-chair, and pitched his felt hat across the room. There seemed a sense of rest, even of luxury, possibly of triumph, in reposing there, with his full-veined white hands clasped, and his deep-set eyes looking before him at the pattern on the walls.

“The same rooms, the same scenes and characters, the same position, the same life and love and fortune! Val Merrick,” he said, apostrophising himself, “you’re a lucky man; you were born under a lucky star, that is not likely to wane. I wonder what I have done to deserve all this. I’m no better than other men—I’m a trifle worse as regards many traits of character. I’m beastly selfish—I’m fond of money. I have a horribly good opinion of myself, that disturbs other folk’s opinion of themselves. I’m not a saint—I don’t believe in saints. I am beset by huge ambitions. If anyone were to know the

end and aim of my life, what a fool I should be thought !”

He reflected upon all this, and forgot that his portmanteau was unlocked, and he still in travelling dress, until a sepulchral gong began booming in the hall by way of hint that dinner was nearly ready. He dressed hurriedly, and almost ran downstairs afterwards; dreaming away time had never been a habit of his, and this was only the reaction after calculating the value of every minute in town.

He was last in the drawing-room; they were all there, and waiting for him, a Mr. Dimsford, the family doctor, the only guest besides himself. Florence was in white, and looking almost like a bride; he could see the blushes on her face and neck as he advanced, and it was pleasant to note her embarrassment, and to feel sure that he had not been forgotten. He thought Lady Andison, with whom he first shook hands, a trifle inflexible about the backbone; she was formal and angular and patronising, but that was her way, and he did not care a great deal for Lady Andison's way. Indeed, he had given such excellent imitations of that lady to his mother last year, that Mrs. Merrick had thought

that, if her Valentine had been less ambitious, he would have been an actor rather than a bar-rister.

When dinner was announced, he had to escort Lady Andison into the dining-room, but Florence sat on the other side of him, and that made amends for a great deal. Yes, it was pleasant to have this fresh happy young girl at his side, and to note how her shyness and embarrassment wore off beneath his own natural manner, which set her at ease. He was not embarrassed in any way himself—why should he be? He was not naturally nervous, and that fair amount of success in his profession which he had already achieved had given him self-possession and strength of nerve. He did not blush and stammer when he spoke to Florence Andison; that “sense of nearness” to her to which the poet alludes did not thrill him to the tips of his dress boots; he could never have understood so extraordinary a sensation.

He was in higher spirits than usual; he knew that he should make her a good husband when the time came, and that she would make him one of the best and most fairy-like of wives; he was certain that she was really and truly in love

with him, and he was very happy in the consciousness of her preference, of the suitability of the match, of the smoothness of his path ahead, and its plenitude of roses by the way. He knew that Sir Charles would not shake his head any more at him, that Percy would rejoice, that even Lady Andison would not offer opposition, and that the Baronet's daughter would accept him without any nonsensical affectation; hence his high spirits were not to be wondered at. Lady Andison would have preferred him more grateful for being acknowledged by the family, more humble and reverential in her presence, more awe-struck by the wealth and position before him; but he was not awe-struck, and it was out of his power to be more conciliatory and less cool. The idea was ingrained in him that he was as good as they were—that a time would come when he would soar above the heads and the aspirations of any old-fashioned, well-to-do, sleepy country family—that the world would acknowledge him and talk of him, and that to know Merrick would be something for people to be proud.

With these ideas Valentine might have become a nuisance to that society of which he

thought himself an ornament, but he was a man of sense, and he was a born gentleman in his way. He never spoke of himself, or of his profession, if he could help it; if he knew that he was a cleverer man than three-fourths of the folk whom he met out, he took no pains to convince them of the fact; he was always natural, and he was too proud a man to be vain.

On that particular evening he was full of anecdote, and not lacking in humour; he interested Lady Andison with the latest town tattle, he charmed Florence with his opinions upon authors, actors and singers, and he was great on politics with Sir Charles and Mr. Dimsford. Percy Andison did not share in the general conversation a great deal; he listened for awhile with a certain amount of attention, forcing himself to be amused with topics in which he took not one grain of interest, and then, after a habit of which there was no breaking him, he went off into a dreamland of his own, and became as absent as usual.

“Don’t you think so, Percy?” woke him up over the last course. Valentine had been addressing him, and Sir Charles, whose irritation would display itself every day at Percy’s indif-

ference or abstraction—although he might have become used to it by this time—glared at his son across the table.

“I don’t know what is the subject under discussion, upon my honour,” said Percy, frankly.

“I wonder what on earth you were thinking about,” remarked his father, petulantly.

“That would be difficult to explain,” Percy Andison remarked.

“Are you quite sure that Miss Shaldon was not at the bottom of that last brown study?” asked Valentine.

“Miss Shaldon!” exclaimed Sir Charles—“you don’t know anything about that lady, Mr. Merrick?”

“Only what Percy was good enough to tell me as we drove from the station,” answered the barrister; “he informs me that she’s a mystery, a romance, a——”

“A lady,” said Percy, very quietly, but with some confusion of manner.

“I hope she is,” said Lady Andison, doubtfully; “I try to think that she is, but I cannot understand a young person so wholly without friends, relatives, and acquaintances.”

"They are all coming presently," cried Florence, "she has not been here long, and she *is* a lady."

"You admire her?" said Valentine to her.

"Yes," answered Florence; "though she does not admire me a bit. I offended her by taking her unawares at Weddercombe; but I was in a hurry to see her, and Percy spoke in such raptures about her beauty, that I surprised her by a flying visit.

"I am not aware that I spoke in 'such raptures,' as you term it," said Percy, a little caustically. "I told you, Floy, that we had a new neighbour, and you paid her a morning call in a rather unceremonious manner. There's nothing very remarkable in that."

"But there's something very remarkable in her, is there not, Percy dear?" said Florence, archly; and Percy reddened a little, and looked a gross or two of daggers at his sister.

"I think that we are talking a great deal of nonsense," said Sir Charles, tetchily; and as this was taken as a hint that the host objected to the topic of conversation, the subject was adroitly changed by Valentine.

Time passed on, the dessert followed the din-

ner, and the ladies' departure followed the desert. The gentlemen, left behind, drew their chairs closer together, brought the decanters within easy reach, and went head-foremost all four of them into politics, which Percy condescended to consider a congenial topic, now that his mother and sister had departed. They talked politics till the prize footman brought in the coffee, and a second prize footman glided round with milk and sugar; and when that little ceremony had been gone through, and the servants had left, Valentine Merrick drew his chair close to the Baronet's, looked very steadily and earnestly into his sharp face, and said, in a low voice, "Sir Charles, it is as well that I should tell you at once all that I have in my mind in coming to your house."

"Very well, Mr. Merrick," said Sir Charles bowing gravely, though he was taken a little, aback by our hero's frankness.

"Doctor Dimsford, before joining the ladies, you would not object to a cigar in the garden with me," said Percy, "while Mr. Merrick and my father discuss business for a few moments?"

"Ah, you know my weakness; I shall enjoy a cigar immensely," said the Doctor.

Percy laughed across at Valentine as he followed the Doctor through the open French window to the lawn beyond, but Val remained very grave as befitted the occasion.

When the two men were alone, Valentine went as straight as an arrow to the subject, and Sir Charles put the tips of his fingers together and listened graciously.

"I might have deferred this statement till the morning, Sir Charles, but there was no excuse for delay," he began. "I have come here with a purpose, which I think you know, and to which I hope you do not object. Twelve months ago I informed you of the state of my feelings as regarded your daughter Florence, and you told me in return to wait twelve months to give her time and myself time, to keep even twelve months away from her, so that any fleeting fancy might die of its own weakness. I come back twelve months to the day—I am received at Hernley Hall with much courtesy and kindness—may I take that as an earnest that my attentions are not objectionable, and that I have your permission now to speak to Florence?"

Sir Charles released his finger-tips and held

out his hand towards Mr. Merrick. "You may."

"Thank you, thank you!" cried Valentine, with warmth.

"I believe that you will make my Florence a good husband. I don't want to lose her yet awhile, you understand—she is the only girl, and Heaven knows that I am very proud of her."

Sir Charles's voice broke here, but he made a dash at the sherry, and carried away all trace of emotion with his "whitewash." He linked his arm in Valentine's, and the two made their way slowly towards the French windows in amicable contiguity.

"I am glad that you have spoken out, Valentine," said he, calling his companion by his Christian name for the first time in his life.

"I thought it was the better plan."

"Infinitely better."

"It gave you an opportunity of telling me to go, should I have been wrong in my estimation of your sentiments regarding me," said Valentine.

"I should have not let you approach as far as my dinner-table if I had been inclined to act the stern father; and, by the way," he added,

as they stood together on the lawn, "Let Lady Andison hear a similar statement to-night, so that there may be no unfair preference."

"Certainly, Sir Charles—and," he added to himself, "Florence, too, or I'm a milksop!"

CHAPTER IX.

A LATE VISITOR.

THIS was a little dinner-party, without formality—a mere family meeting—where the Doctor had dropped in, and where Valentine Merrick was one of the family. There had been no punctiliousness observed; and Doctor Dimsford, though he wondered what business the Baronet had with the barrister, had not thought it out of course to be turned into the garden along with Percy. He loved a cigar, but Sir Charles Andison objected to smoking. From the drawing-room windows of the stately mansion the gentlemen were perceived upon the lawn, and presently Valentine was despatched as special messenger to induce Lady Andison and her daughter to join them. This

was a failure, or a success, according to one's way of looking at the matter. Florence thought it was the former, until he who thought it was the latter explained at a later hour of the evening.

Lady Andison would not venture into the garden; it would soon be dark, and she had a sensitive throat and was subject to neuralgia. Florence might enjoy the cool evening air if she liked, and if she would wrap herself up properly; and so Florence shortly afterwards was seen upon the lawn in a cloud of blue gauze over her head and shoulders, and Valentine Merrick, to her secret astonishment, remained behind to talk to her mamma.

Valentine had marched on steadily and in a business-like fashion to the end that he had in view; he had prepared his plan of action, and the time to strike was when the iron was hot. Lady Andison was prepared for him then, and he sat down and started his subject with befitting deference and in all humility. He was not quite certain of Lady Andison—what she would say, or in what way she would say it. He knew that she considered him almost in the light of a bad “catch” for her daughter; that

she looked down upon his present position, and was not sanguine of the future. He was certain that she would be patronising and cold and unsympathetic, and look as if she regretted the coming of that engagement which it was beyond her power to prevent, and possibly tell him so by way of a wind-up; and it was his aim to conciliate Lady Andison, and to impress her, if possible, by his best behaviour.

He succeeded better than he had anticipated. He was frank and courteous and deferential; he pleaded eloquently for her vote and interest; he took her completely into his confidence as to his position in the world; he spoke very warmly of his affection for Miss Andison, his friendship for Percy, his general admiration for every member of the family.

Lady Andison did not warm into enthusiasm, but she did not check the flow of his eloquence; finally she accepted him for her future son-in-law, and granted her generous permission for him to speak to Florence upon the subject. Everybody seemed to know what Florence Andison would say, and to talk of the future as though she had already consented to become this man's wife. Even Valentine Merrick was

quite sure of the conquest that he had made.

Probably this fact accounted for the young barrister's coolness in the midst of that happiness which would have bewildered most men of his age. His heart did beat a little more rapidly when he found himself on the lawn with Florence, when Percy seized the Doctor's arm and trotted him to a remote part of the garden to inspect a splendid specimen of a standard rose, and when Sir Charles Andison, after a few words, walked slowly, and even sadly, towards his wife in the drawing-room. This was the end, then, thought the Baronet; and his girl would belong to the barrister rather than to him, after that meeting on the lawn. It was natural—it was the way the world went round; and he had only brought up Floy, and loved Floy, to lose her. It was the fate of fathers who had pretty daughters, and he was no worse off than other men.

What Valentine Merrick said to Florence Andison at the first opportunity that he had of addressing her alone, there is no occasion to dwell upon. Its purport may be guessed; it is known with what object Mr. Merrick had left town for Hernley, and how he went straight to

the end in view, when it suited his inclination. He liked Florence, and he was not bashful. He was an honourable and a straightforward man, and poor Floy had had the man in her heart, as he knew, for twelve months.

She was a little coy, but she was an unaffected girl of eighteen, and there was no disguising—hardly an attempt to disguise—all the happiness she felt at meeting Valentine Merrick again. He told his story; or, rather, he took up the thread of a story first spun in those very grounds when she was twelve months younger; he proposed and was accepted, and there they were, Corydon and Phyllis, walking slowly up and down the velvet lawn together, lovers acknowledged, man and woman engaged to be married. True, the man had not seen a great deal of the maiden, and the maiden knew very little of the habits of the man; but they were sure that each understood the other's heart perfectly well, that there were no enigmas in their breasts, that all would be very smooth and bright and rose-tinted in their blissful journey through life. Plenty of love, plenty of faith, and plenty of money—where could lurk a sunken rock under the sea to wreck

the happy couple in their voyage together!

"I think it's quite time Floy and Mr. Merrick came in," said Lady Andison, suddenly.

She had been watching them through her gold-mounted eye-glasses, and the three gentlemen were standing at the card-table thinking of whist, three and a dummy. There was no chance of a fourth; it would be very hard on the fourth, Dr. Dimsford had said, laughingly, now that he had seen more clearly into the position, which the Andisons made no great effort to conceal.

"It's a fine dry evening," said Percy—"why should we disturb them, mamma?"

"That lawn is never dry—and the tea is getting cold—and I think Mr. Merrick has spoken quite enough nonsense to Florence for one evening—and it doesn't look well," said Lady Andison in a low fretful tone. "Percy, tell them that——"

"Here they come, mamma."

Valentine and Florence both understood "the proprieties," and after all they had only taken one more stroll upon the lawn when there had been a move towards the drawing-room. They came in bright and radiant; Florence very beau-

tiful, Valentine with all the deep thoughts of his profession set apart from him, it was evident by the laughing look upon his face. They were not ashamed of their engagement, or what might be said of it by any gentleman there disposed to be facetious. They were proud of it, and were even a little disappointed on their entrance that no remarks were made upon their preference for each other's society. Lady Andison filled two little dainty Sèvres cups with tea for them, and the servants in attendance waited upon them as they sat side by side upon the sofa.

The three gentlemen settled down to whist, and at the second game induced Lady Andison—who was a lady who required a great deal of persuasion to do anything—to take Doctor Dimsford for a partner. Miss Andison was asked to play the piano—a feat which she performed very feebly and imperfectly, not being highly proficient at that instrument, and Valentine putting her out by whispering to her all the time, under the pretence of turning over the leaves of the music.

“Thank you, my dear,” said Sir Charles, when she had finished playing.

“Very nicely played indeed,” said Doctor

Dimsford, who had not paid attention to a note of it—"excellently pla—— Your trick, Lady Andison."

"Thank you, Doctor—I am perfectly aware that it's my trick," said Lady Andison with acerbity.

There was a great deal of whist and very little music. Valentine and Florence discovered a huge photographic album to bury themselves in, and sat side by side again, and turned over its leaves both at the same time, with their hands constantly meeting in the clumsiest manner.

"This is Percy's album, not the family collection of notabilities," said Florence; "these ugly old men are all members of learned societies."

"They do run rather ugly," said Valentine, looking at them; "but I dare say that they are grateful for being blessed with big brains instead of babies' faces, Flo."

"I should not like to be a handsome man," said Floy, thoughtfully.

"No, I suppose not; nor to marry one either."

"Oh, I wouldn't marry a handsome man for the world!" she answered, readily.

"I must be rather plain," thought Valentine; "I must look uncommonly plain this evening."

“That’s a handsome face—that’s Doctor Dimsford’s eldest son—and that’s Mr. Whistleshaft, the auctioneer at Chingford. Percy,” elevating her voice, “why have you put that odious little man into this book?”

“What—who?” murmured Percy, absorbed in his whist.

“Mr. Whistleshaft.”

“Oh! he’s very well, I believe,” said Percy.

The lovers gave him up as past reasoning with.

“He’s studying heads—that’s the reason, perhaps,” said Florence.

“I prefer studying hearts,” whispered Valentine.

“How many, sir?” asked Florence, archly.

“Only one.”

“Oh, of course! But I should like to know, really,” she said, dropping her voice, “if there ever was at any time of your life—before you knew me—one tiny heart that might have interested you somewhere—just a little?”

“Never,” said Valentine, very fearlessly.

“Honour?”

“Honour bright, Flo,” cried Val; “for you must know I never thought that I should fall

in love, or be able to afford the time, or find the lady. When you peep into my rooms in the Temple some day, and I show you row after row of big law-books, dry as ashes to him who loves not the law as I do, and tell you that I have read them all, and studied them all, and mastered them all, you will understand what a little time I have had for anything save work."

"But you did find time to—to like me, Val?" she murmured.

"Ah, I did!"

"And you will never find time to get tired of me—to forget me in the big law-books again?"

"Is that likely?"

"I seem to have been caught so easily," she said, with a little sigh, "as if I had been such dreadful spoons—oh, I beg pardon, that's not a genteel way of talking to one's betrothed."

"I hate gentility, it's a sham."

"Yes, but don't tell mamma. She—ab, there's Percy's sketch of Miss Shaldon; I thought it was next the poor fellow's heart."

"Like a pitch plaster for a hoarseness," said our hero, as he stooped and picked up the little square piece of drawing paper which had fluttered from the book to the carpet; "I beg your

pardon, Floy—that's not a genteel way of putting it either—the simile I mean, not the plaster. Percy was almost a genius with his pencil once, and this should be a likeness."

"Dear old Percy is almost a genius in many things," said Florence; "and that is a likeness cleverly caught."

"At church, where many young fellows are caught, I am told," he said, dryly, "where——"

And then Valentine Merrick came to a full stop, held the sketch at arm's length, stared his hardest at it, and forgot what he was talking about. Florence waited very patiently, looked over his shoulder at the sketch, and then looked, after a while, at her lover with a half curious, half attentive gaze, which he failed to perceive in his absorption.

There was nothing striking in the sketch; it represented the face of a pensive, beautiful girl; it was a mere outline lacking the expression which shade or colour might have given to it—but it held Valentine Merrick spell-bound. He sat there like a man perplexed as well as fascinated; and the broad forehead seemed to be jutting still more over the grey eyes as he gazed at it with an eager interest.

"It is very strange," he said at last, and almost to himself.

"What is very strange, Val?" asked Florence.

He was surprised that she had heard him, but he said, "It is a very strange face—don't you think so?"

"No, only that it is very beautiful, and one that I liked at first sight—almost as much as you do, Val?" she added archly.

"I never said that I liked the face, Florence."

"Perhaps it was my jealousy. Oh, you don't know what a jealous girl I am—what a dreadful life I shall lead you when any lady looks at you even. I'm awfully jealous—that's my weakness."

"I said that this was a strange face, Flo," Valentine remarked, still with the sketch in his hand; "but I am inclined to doubt it, after all. The closer I study this, the more convinced I seem to be that I have seen it before. So this is Helena Shaldon, your brother's romance."

"How did you know her name was Helena?" asked Florence, very quickly.

"Percy told me so this afternoon."

“Ah, very likely,” said Florence; “he will grow eloquent upon Miss Shaldon at any moment. And she is really very nice and very pretty, and I only wish she would let me call her my friend.”

“You have quite enough friends, Florence. The new deceive us very often.”

“You are a new friend—almost.”

“I hope not;” and here his hand strayed to hers and pressed it. “And, Flo, if you will take my advice, you will make no new friend here. The lady is mysterious, your mother says; and mysterious young ladies without antecedents may prove very dangerous company.”

“I feel, Val, that I can trust her.”

“That is sentiment, not reasoning, and it is the impulsive nature that gets into scrapes, and——”

The door opened, and the footman appeared with so scared an expression of countenance that Valentine stopped, and the whist-players held back their cards and gazed at the intruder.

“What is it, James?” cried Lady Andison. “Is anything on fire? Have you broken anything?”

“If you please, my lady, it’s the young lady

from Weddercombe," he said, coming forward with a salver on which a card was placed. "She's very anxious to see somebody at once. She's very much excited, ma'am."

Lady Andison took the card from the salver, and levelled her double eye-glass at it critically.

"Yes, it's Miss Shaldon, sure enough," she remarked.

"What can she want?" muttered the Baronet.

"Something has happened," said the Baronet's son.

"I shall know now," said Valentine Merrick to himself.

CHAPTER X.

THE YOUNG LADY FROM WEDDERCOMBE.

AFTER realising completely the fact that Miss Helena Shaldon had arrived at Hernley Hall, Lady Andison half rose from her chair, as if with the intention of going to her, and then sat down again.

“Show Miss Shaldon in,” said Lady Andison.

“She is coming. You will now have an opportunity of seeing her, Val,” whispered Florence in her lover’s ear.

Valentine Merrick did not appear greatly impressed by the chance which had been offered him ; on the contrary, when Florence had risen, and was standing close to the door, as though anxious to be the first to welcome the visitor, he screwed himself round in his corner of the couch and applied himself with extraordinary assiduity to the photographic album, which he

had already gone through with Florence Andison. He did not even look up when Miss Shaldon was ushered into the room; but his abstraction, or his studied reserve, escaped notice in the excitement created by the young lady's appearance.

Helena Shaldon was very pale; a small black lace bonnet had fallen back from her face, which, striking in its beauty, and possessing a new and scarcely earthly aspect in its pallor, was more deserving of Valentine Merrick's attention than the stolid gallery of portraits in his hands.

"Welcome, Miss Shaldon," said Florence, shaking hands with her; "I trust that nothing has happened at Weddercombe to alarm you?"

"We should be very sorry to hear——" Sir Charles had begun, when the lady of Weddercombe hastened to explain herself.

"You will excuse my want of ceremony in calling at this hour and in this manner," she said, addressing Lady Andison, and speaking with a rapidity which was difficult to follow, "but I am without assistance at Weddercombe, and Mrs. Graves, my housekeeper, has been taken suddenly and seriously ill. Dr. Dimsford is

here, I am told. I have been to his house, and—”

“I am Dr. Dimsford,” said the physician, rising, and bowing very politely—“and at your service, Miss Shaldon.”

“Pray come at once, then—do not lose a moment!” she cried. “I have never known her to be ill before—not ailing for a minute. Great Heaven! if she were to die, and leave me quite alone.”

“Is it a fit or what?” asked Dr. Dimsford.

“I don’t know—I can’t tell; I have seen a great deal of illness, but nothing like this. Cannot we go at once, please?” she urged, wringing her hands in her distress.

“My dear young lady, you may be unnecessarily alarming yourself,” said the physician; “let me beg of you to be calm. I am quite prepared to accompany you.”

“Thank you.”

“If I can be of service in any way, Miss Shaldon——” Percy began, but she checked him in the same hasty and half absent manner.

“No, thank you—I only require Dr. Dimsford’s assistance. My carriage is at the door,” she said.

“If you would let me come with you for an

hour or two," said Florence eagerly; "you are very much excited and distressed."

"Thank you very much, Miss Andison, but—no," she added, hesitatingly.

Lady Andison was gesticulating mysteriously to her daughter, who, however, failed to perceive her, and Valentine's head for a moment peered round the scroll end of the couch and was turned in the direction of Miss Shaldon.

"If—if anything should happen—if Mrs. Graves should be very ill," said Florence.

Helena Shaldon became a shade paler, and looked with a pitiful terror at the speaker.

"Oh! yes; and I so weak in time of danger—so weak as this after all," she cried. "Thank you again, Miss Andison: you are very considerate. I had not anticipated so much kindness at your hands, but——"

"I will go back with you," cried Florence, and the instant afterwards she had darted out of the drawing-room.

"Stop that mad child, Sir Charles!" cried Lady Andison, lying back half prostrate in her chair. "It's sure to be something catching."

"No, no, it is nothing of that kind," answered Helena.

"You can't tell, you don't know, Miss Shaldon—you haven't caught everything I suppose," murmured Lady Andison.

"I will bring Miss Andison back, if I see any cause for fear," said the doctor.

"There is no necessity——" began Miss Shaldon, when Florence Andison bustled back into the room, heavily cloaked and hat in hand, and took up the subject in her own way.

"There is every necessity. You are not well, Miss Shaldon; and I am sure that some one of your own age will be of comfort and assistance to you. I am always a comfort too, and so handy! I'm quiteready. Mamma," in a low voice, as she stooped and kissed her, "I may go—I must go. Good-bye till to-morrow. Good night, papa—you don't mind, I am sure. Good night, Percy—good night, Valentine," she said, flitting round to the couch; "I may go, mayn't I? You don't mind?"

"It's too late to express an opinion, Floy," he said, very thoughtfully; "but you may go, on one condition."

"Ah, you are joking with me!"

"Not at all."

"Well, tyrant, what is it?"

“That Percy and I fetch you in the morning.”

“Very well—certainly—if all’s well,” and then she ran out of the room, followed by Doctor Dimsford and Miss Shaldon. Percy and Valentine Merrick brought up the rear; they went through the hall and into the cool, dark grounds in front of the house, where Miss Shaldon’s carriage was waiting.

Percy Andison took the opportunity to improve the occasion, and walked on by the young lady’s side, expressing the hope that she would find on her return that the housekeeper was better. Valentine Merrick kept very much in the background, as if to allow fair play to his friend. There was no overtaking Miss Andison, and he had given up the idea—if, indeed, he had ever entertained it.

He was an eccentric as well as a clever man, it may be thought. He had said his adieux in the drawing-room, and he did not care to repeat them; he disliked vain repetitions. Florence Andison was not aware that he was there to see the last of her until she suddenly caught sight of him standing against the dark background of laurustinus planted on one side of the great

portico, and looking hard at her and her companion by the light of the carriage lamp within. She waved her hand to him, and he returned the salutation without a smile upon his face.

"I have offended him by leaving him like this," thought Florence, with a sigh. "Heigho! I hope he's not a bad temper—not going to take offence at every little thing I say or do that is contrary to his pleasure. Oh no—that's not like my Val."

Meanwhile Valentine and Percy stood bare-headed outside in the Summer night, watching the carriage recede down the drive.

"This is an odd start, Merrick," said Percy; "but I hope it's nothing serious."

"Miss Shaldon may be a lady easily alarmed," replied Valentine, curtley.

The tone of his reply struck Percy, who looked more intently at him, standing there in the darkness as if he did not care to go indoors again.

"You don't like Florence's departure, Val?" he said, quickly.

"I cannot say that I am particularly delighted," was the dry reply.

"But this is a case of emergency—the house-

keeper is ill, and her mistress is nervous and easily alarmed, you see."

"I see," said Valentine. "And, if the house-keeper dies, what does Florence know about death?"

"Eh?"

"She has subjected herself to a great trial—an immense shock. Like your mother, I object very seriously to this."

"Why didn't you say No?"

"It was early time to assert my authority, and she was anxious to go," replied Valentine.

"Yes; and under any circumstances she will be of service—it is her duty to be of service," said Percy. "Florence is a brave girl; and, if the worst comes, she will not give way. For my part, I am glad that she has gone, Val—and I cannot help saying so."

"You are smitten by the attractions of Miss Shaldon," said Valentine, contemptuously.

"I don't acknowledge that, Val," cried Percy; "I am certainly interested in her."

"Or in the mystery about her?"

"That may have something to do with it."

"Mysteries have their attractions for certain orders of minds; but there are mysteries which

hide dark lives and hideous things," said Valentine.

"Ah, but this is a mystery which hides only a great sorrow."

"How do you know?" asked Valentine curtly.

"Look at the sadness of the face, the heart-weariness of expression, the beauty and purity even of that sadness," cried Percy, enthusiastically.

"Would not repentance for first error assume that kind of look—or remorse—or shame?"

"Nothing like it," cried Percy; "and you have no right, Val, to suggest such a thing—upon my soul, you haven't!" he cried, indignantly.

"I was only asking a question," said Valentine, laughing at last, and laughing very immoderately, as there did not appear to be a great deal of fun going about. "Your pardon, signor, but you are very far gone. You are deeply touched by the charms of this lady with a secret; you are as mad as a hatter, Percy; and the simile reminds me that we are standing here bareheaded. What are you waiting for?"

"What are you waiting for, Val?" was the rejoinder.

"For you."

"Come along, then," said Percy.

The two young men went into the house and rejoined the Baronet and his helpmate, whom they discovered aggravating each other by much tartness of expression. There had been a difference of opinion, during the absence of Valentine and Percy, between Sir Charles and his wife, and the subject of discussion had been the departure *sans cérémonie* of Florence Andison to Weddercombe. Lady Andison had asserted the entire proceeding to be of the wild-goose class of expedition, and Sir Charles had considered that Florence had only acted up to her own warm and generous impulses, and could not have done less than offer her assistance to a neighbour situated as Miss Shaldon was.

"Miss Shaldon has no right to be situated as she is, Sir Charles," Lady Andison was saying, as they entered.

"Miss Shaldon knows her own business best, you may depend upon it, Lady Andison," Sir Charles replied with severe politeness.

"Florence should have taken her maid with her," said the lady, "if she was determined to lower herself in this way. Florence knows that I do not like Miss Shaldon—that I distrust

Miss Shaldon's reasons for hiding herself."

"Lady Andison, in moments of serious alarm, of dangerous illness, of a crisis, as it were, in our existence, we do not weigh everything scrupulously," said Sir Charles. "Florence did not think of her maid, or of her mamma's prejudice, I fear; she only dashed at the idea of getting away."

"Which was very complimentary to all of us," said Lady Andison; "what does Mr. Merrick say?"

Valentine was annoyed at being dragged into the discussion, but he disguised his vexation with admirable skill. He had practised hiding his annoyance for years from stupid witnesses, obstinate juries, aggravating judges, and the counsel on the other side.

"I must confess that I think Florence will be of great service to Miss Shaldon," he replied. "She is about the lady's own age, and the lady is evidently of a nervous temperament, who may need a friendly hand and womanly sympathy. You, my dear Lady Andison, cannot ask me to blame Florence for anything she says and does?"

"Well, no, I suppose not," said Lady Andi-

son ; “but Sir Charles is so unpleasantly disputatious when any opinion is expressed that is contrary to his own, and, poor man, he is so invariably in the wrong, that——”

“My dear, I am going to bed,” said Sir Charles, cutting short her estimate of his character ; and, after a hasty good night all round, he walked with precise steps from the room.

Valentine Merrick, pleading the fatigue of the journey as his excuse, followed the Baronet’s example, and repaired to his own apartments, where, after the manner of a man who was far from fatigued, he unpacked from his valise a small travelling-desk, which he set on a table near the window, and unlocked and opened. He did not commence writing immediately after these preparations ; he walked up and down his spacious bedchamber, and thought a great deal of Florence, of Miss Andison—of what he should say to his mother, perhaps—his mother, who would be restless till she heard from her boy, and was quite sure that he had got down to Hernley in safety.

He was at his desk at last, where he dashed off the following note, which affords some faint clue to his character :—

“Hernley Hall, January 26, 18—

“MY DEAR MOTHER,—You will be glad to hear that I have reached the old quarters in safety, and am once again in the happy hunting grounds where I first chased the heiress your prudence thought long ago would be a fitting helpmate for me. They were all pleased to see me—everyone of them, I heartily believe—although Lady A. might have been a trifle more cordial in her greeting with advantage. Old-fashioned, warm-hearted, poetical Percy almost cried at the railway-station when he met me; I felt that I had neglected him, even slighted him, when I saw him again, but he did not reproach me by a word. He is a good fellow, and destined to much unhappiness—as good fellows always are, let them be as rich as Jew financiers.

“And Florence?—you will say. Well, my dear mother, it is all settled! I have not hesitated; I have not concealed my love, and let concealment prey on my leathern cheek: I have had the cheek to declare myself instead. There is a pun for a tired traveller, let off in a moment at 11.30 P.M.; excuse the vulgarity of it, for the sake of the exquisite humour contained

in its expression? Yes, Florence is mine, and you are happy. So am I, though sons are never highly hilarious, as a rule, over maternal counsel tenderly conveyed. I am happy—I shall always be happy; she's a frank, fearless, exceedingly pretty young woman, who will make your son one of the best and most exemplary of wives. I have done well; never, in all my life, please God, shall I experience one regret for this day, though I have not felt as romantic and maniacal as the novelists would have us believe that we do in the first flush of our courtship.

“I don't say that Florence is without faults—that I wholly admire her slap-dash way of going ahead—that, though I am slangy myself, I like the sharp things or odd things which escape her now and then; but I see that she is charmingly natural, truly affectionate and earnest, and I estimate the value of my prize from another point of view besides the money one. I shall be a wonderful husband in the days ahead, awfully attentive even, when the briefs will allow me.

“Sir Charles will not hear of a hasty marriage—and I do not want to dash head-first into wed-

lock, like Harlequin through the shop window. Floy and I will wait a reasonable period, before we say 'I will.' Write me a long letter soon, and tell me all the home news—who has called, and who has not, and how the world rolls on without me. Never mind about business; unfortunately my clerk in the Temple will keep me posted in those details too well.

"Good night, dear mother. I am writing this in the stillly hours, so that you may not think I am neglecting the best friend I have in the world, 'bar none'—as the 'sporting gents' say. No; not even Floy Andison. Could I confide in her yet awhile, as I do in you? Ever your affectionate son,

"VAL MERRICK."

The postscript was a strange one. Was it more important than the letter, after the fashion which is unjustly attributed to letters penned by feminine hands? Probably.

"P.S.—In my private letter drawer—compartment B—you will find, I believe, a sealed packet of papers, marked on the envelope, 'Barclay.' Please post it to me, and register the

same for safe transmission. If not to be found, surprise my clerk at the Temple by a look-in, and ask him to refer to compartment B in the press by the fire-place, and look for the papers there. This is immediate ; business haunts me still, you perceive. Good night."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SICK HOUSEKEEPER.

THE journey to Weddercombe was conducted with much swiftness, as though Miss Shaldon's coachman had received orders not to spare horseflesh in his efforts to save time. As might have been expected, it was not a cheerful journey; nor did Miss Shaldon and Floy Andison converse together at any great length during the ride from Hernley Hall to the late Colonel Chester's shooting-box. Dr. Dimsford prepared himself for his case by asking many questions of the lady who had disturbed him at his whist, and Florence sat and listened.

Mrs. Graves had been found lying stiff and insensible on the floor of her room, it appeared, and had been lifted into bed by Helena and a servant-maid. She had recovered consciousness, but scarcely reason, and had talked and

raved and gesticulated until the moment of Helena's setting forth in search of the doctor ; those servants whom she could trust having been already sent in different directions, and one alone having returned with the information that Dr. Dimsford was at Hernley Hall, whither, in her impulsiveness, Helena had determined to follow him.

"If she should die, I don't see what to do," she said.

Was this selfishness, or the despairing cry of one who feared losing the only friend she had in the world ?

"Courage, Miss Shaldon," said the Doctor ; "from your description of the symptoms, I have a hope that there is nothing to fear. Mrs. Graves is subject to these attacks, perhaps?"

"No," said Helena.

"Is she related to you?" Florence ventured to inquire.

"Not by blood," answered Helena ; "she is intimately related to me by ties of friendship which nothing can alienate or weaken. She is everything to me—the dearest, stanchest, most unselfish of friends, humble as her position is, ill-educated as she may be."

"One of those faithful old servants that are getting out of fashion, I conjecture," said the Doctor.

"More than that," replied Helena, thoughtfully, "infinitely more than that."

"A female Caleb Balderstone," added the Doctor, jocularly.

The lady whom he addressed did not smile at the effort he made to give a pleasant turn to the conversation. She regarded him steadily and said,

"With a female Ravenswood for mistress, as misanthropic and mysterious as the gloomy hero of Scott's novel, only not in reduced circumstances. That is what they say in Chingford and Hernley, I believe?"

There was a touch of bitterness in her tone, even a tinge of sarcasm, as though the verdict of Chingford and Hernley had affected her more than she cared to confess, and Florence said quickly,

"Chingford and Hernley, on the contrary, sing loudly the praises of Miss Shaldon."

"You flatter me," answer Helena.

"The poor speak of you as their benefactor."

"They are very good," said Helena, "and

very patient, the best of them. Ah, I envy the patience of the poor."

Florence did not ask why ; something deterred her from putting the question to her companion. They were silent the remainder of the way to Weddercombe, where a surprise awaited them. As they stopped before the house, the door was opened, and the gaunt woman concerning whom so much anxiety had been expressed, stood on the threshold, holding a light in one hand, and shading her eyes with the other, as she gazed towards the equipage.

"There she is!" cried Miss Shaldon, with excitement. "It is she! She is better—she is well again—it is like coming out of her coffin!"

Florence shuddered at the comparison, and, with the strong light on the lower part of the housekeeper's white and rigid face, it did not look unlike it.

"Is this the lady who has been ill?" asked the Doctor in a low, surprised tone.

"Yes, thank Heaven!"

Doctor Dimsford did not see anything to thank Heaven for ; he had lost a patient, and had been dragged from a comfortable game at

whist at an unreasonable period of the evening to an alarming case which proved not to be alarming at all, and which had evidently been grossly exaggerated by Miss Shaldon.

Still Mrs. Graves had been ill ; there was no looking at that lady's face and doubting the fact, though she seemed to resist scrutiny and glare defiantly at the Doctor already. Taken altogether, the grim housekeeper was not a pleasant being to confront, as Miss Shaldon and her two visitors stepped from the brougham to the house.

"You bring company at a late hour, madam," said Mrs. Graves, in a deep voice.

"I bring assistance to you, Jane," said Miss Shaldon, timidly, almost apologetically, "I left you very ill."

"I was poorly—perhaps," answered Jane Graves, in a hesitating manner, as though uncertain of the fact ; "there was no occasion to send for any help for me. I don't require any help—I won't have any."

"Oh, yes, you will—to oblige me, Jane," said Helena, coaxingly ; "I am uneasy—I have been very much alarmed," she pleaded.

"Some folk are easily scared," said Mrs. Graves, sententiously.

She stood in the doorway still, as if disposed to bar all ingress to the house, and only backed reluctantly and sullenly when her mistress was close upon her.

“Who is this?” she said, in a loud whisper, as Miss Andison passed. “The lady who came yesterday?”

“Yes—Miss Andison. Miss Andison,” said Helena, addressing Florence, “this is my faithful friend and old companion, Mrs. Graves.”

“I am glad that you are better, Mrs. Graves,” said Florence. “This is my friend Dr. Dimsford, whom we have brought to see you.”

“I don’t require any doctors, thank you,” was the slow answer vouchsafed to this.

“But, my good lady, doctors are necessary evils, you know,” said the physician in his cheeriest tone—that tone which had reconciled many in his time to pills and nasty mixtures.

“I don’t know,” was the answer, “I am only certain that I don’t believe in them.”

“How is that?”

“I never had a doctor in my life—I am not going to begin now.”

She reeled suddenly, and a faint cry escaped

Helena, who ran to her and put her arms round her.

This sudden weakness, this alacrity of assistance on Helena's part, annoyed Mrs. Graves, and she gently disengaged Helena's hands, drew herself up very stiffly, and led the way to the drawing-room, where two wax candles were burning.

"You'll allow Dr. Dimsford to ask you a few questions, Jane," said Miss Shaldon, entreatingly, "I have brought him on purpose."

"I won't have any doctors to attend upon me," said Jane Graves sturdily.

"I shall be very uneasy—I shall not rest, if you remain thus obstinate."

Mrs. Graves bestowed a quick glance upon her mistress, and muttered,

"I am not obstinate—there was no occasion for the doctor—I don't like doctors; but, if he wants to ask me any questions, he can—there."

"That's a good kind Jane," cried Helena.

"But not with you in the room—or that lady—only himself," insisted Mrs. Graves.

Helena Shaldon willingly consented.

"You have not seen my little library, Miss

Andison," she said ; and, linking her arm in that of Florence, in a new and friendly manner that surprised her companion, the two young women left Mrs. Graves to the Doctor's questioning, and crossed the hall to a room filled from floor to ceiling with books.

"Here I read my life away," Helena said, half jestingly, half sadly ; "here are the friends who never tire of me—who never forsake me. Are you fond of reading?"

"Occasionally," said Florence ; "I like music and riding better. One studious member is enough in a family."

"Your brother is studious."

"Yes ; how did you know that?"

"Your mamma told me on the one occasion that she favoured me with a visit," replied Helena.

The two girls—for after all they were little more—did not sit down. Florence wandered from case to case of books, regarding curiously the titles, probably trying to guess at the character of Miss Shaldon from the volumes that had been massed together ; and Helena followed, glancing at the bright young face with an interest which seemed growing upon her as she

gazed. The books became a fresh subject for Florence to marvel at, there were so many deep and ponderous tomes amongst them, but she did not comment upon the collection until Helena said,

“The subjects of my books surprise you, I perceive.”

“Some of them are awfully deep,” ejaculated Florence, thus appealed to, “and not at all in my line. I would not attempt to read them for the world.”

“I have not read those at which you are looking now.”

“Then—” began Florence, when her companion anticipated her inquiry.

“They belonged to a friend of mine.”

“Ah, I see ; yours by inheritance?” said Florence.

She took from the shelf one of the volumes that had attracted her by its title and opened it. Helena made a half movement as if to restrain her, and then turned away and walked towards the window, drawing the heavy curtains aside as though to note the beauty of the night. On the inner side of the cover was the book-plate of a previous owner, the crest and coat of arms

elaborately engraved, and "Michael Barclay" written in Italian hand beneath. This was the name of the friend, Florence thought at once, but she was a discreet girl and asked no questions. The impression had seized her that by a natural accident she had learned something which her companion did not care that she should know.

"Some of these books I have purchased at sales," said Helena's voice, so close to her side again that she started; "I am fond of sales, you are aware. It is the etiquette of book collectors to respect the book plates of previous owners."

"Yes," answered Florence. "My brother Percy is very particular about his book plates. How he would like to see these volumes! Some of them are very scarce, I should say?"

"I believe that there are some scarce books amongst them," answered Helena, without noticing Florence's allusion to her brother.

Florence was replacing the volume, when the door opened and Doctor Dimsford entered the library. Both women looked towards him eagerly; his face was not particularly bright,

and Helena Shaldon, evidently a quick reader of faces, went towards him anxiously.

"She is not well—she is worse than she pretends to be!" cried Helena.

"She pretends to be quite well, so she is evidently worse than that, Miss Shaldon," said the Doctor; "and she has been seriously and suddenly ill. Is she—you will excuse my asking the question—a truthful woman?"

"Very truthful."

"She denies being subject to these attacks, or that this is anything of moment. My own idea is that this is not the first time Mrs. Graves has been prostrated in the manner which you have described to me this evening."

"It is possible," said Helena, after reflecting upon this; "she would keep everything from me if she could; not having so much confidence in my self-command as I have myself. But she is not very ill, surely?" she added.

"No—no," said the Doctor, hesitatingly; "she may be going on now very well, although she is not quite right yet. She wants watching; she has acted injudiciously in getting up. I have persuaded her to return to bed and rest until the morning."

"Thank you," said Helena, gratefully.

"And from my little case I have compounded a composing draught, which I have also induced her to take."

"Why, Doctor, you have done wonders; for Mrs. Graves is very firm at times," said Helena.

"Not a doubt of that. Now, Miss Florence, I think that I may offer you my escort back to Hernley Hall."

"To-night!" said Florence Andison in protest, "when I have come to stay with Miss Shaldon, and to be of assistance if necessary!"

"There does not appear any necessity to remain—any absolute necessity, that is," replied the Doctor, with an evident effort to catch Miss Andison's eye without attracting the attention of Miss Shaldon.

"But I intend to remain."

"Thank you, Miss Andison," said Helena, warmly; "I should be glad if you would stay now, if I am not disturbing you too much, or rendering those at home in any way anxious concerning you. But there is no absolute necessity, as Doctor Dimsford tells us."

"You are alone in this place?"

"I have my servants," answered Helena,

“and you must not consider me before yourself. Talk the matter over with your friend whilst I go and see Mrs. Graves, and in any way that you decide consider me none the less grateful.”

As she passed from the room, Doctor Dimsford crossed to Florence’s side, and said, in a low tone, “You must not stop here; you must get back to Hernley as soon as you can.”

“Why?” asked Florence.

“That old woman is mad,” answered the Doctor; “she may lead you a terrible life in the night. There is no occasion to expose yourself to this trial. Miss Shaldon is quite willing that you should return; and you are young and unused to sickness.”

“Miss Shaldon is young, and more nervous than I,” said Florence, very firmly; “look at her poor white face to-night.”

“But——”

“I shall stop; I should be a chicken-hearted girl to run away.”

“What do you think Mrs. Graves said was the cause of her illness?”

“I cannot guess,” replied Florence.

“A ghost—a real ghost in her room—at her elbow, in the twilight!”

Florence Andison was a brave girl, but there was an instinct to break forth into goose-flesh at the Doctor's statement. She drew a deep breath, and then delivered herself of an extraordinary word for a young lady on whom a vast amount of money had been expended for her education.

"Bosh!" she ejaculated.

"Of course it's all nonsense—hallucination—bosh," said the Doctor; "but that is no reason——"

"It is every reason why I should stay at Weddercombe to-night," affirmed Florence. "I like Miss Shaldon, and I intend to stick by her, and show that I am as plucky as the rest of the Andisons. I am not going to run away. Here is a chance of making a friend, and friends are scarce; and this dark-eyed lady I liked at first sight. There, good night, Doctor; I shall not be gobbled up, body and bones and all, before daylight."

"You are a most extraordinary young woman," said Doctor Dimsford; "and I admire your courage and resolution; but," he added, archly, "you'll lead Mr. Merrick a terrible life some day."

“Oh! Doctor,” said Florence, laughing and blushing.

Doctor Dimsford was a friend of the family, and was not going too far with his jesting, at which he laughed himself very heartily. Helena Shaldon re-entered and found them very merry together.

“What is the decision?” she asked, anxiously.

“That I am not going away to-night,” said Florence, decisively.

“Thank you,” Helena said again, as though she had feared to pass the night without her.

CHAPTER XII.

FRIENDS FOR A NIGHT.

HELENA SHALDON and Florence Andison returned to the drawing-room, and sat down in defiance of late hours.

"I have given orders for a room to be prepared for you, Miss Andison," said Helena; "there will be no occasion to sit up all night. I only seem to require the consciousness of a friend near me."

"I am very glad that you consider me a friend—that you call me one," said Florence, quickly.

"You have acted like a friend in coming to help me with your sympathy. I am for ever indebted to your kindness. When we have assumed our old positions—you at Hernley, I at Weddercombe," said Helena—"I shall bear you in kind remembrance."

"Is there any necessity for assuming the old positions," asked Florence, "now that you and I are beginning to understand each other?"

"Yes," said Helena, in reply. She looked down at the carpet, as though endeavouring to read some lesson that was woven there with the pattern, and then looked up suddenly. "I am not fitted for society," she said, in further explanation; "I have been recommended rest and peace—the world distracts me always."

"But I am not society or the world."

"You come from it—you are part of it—knowing you more intimately would lead me closer to it and unsettle me."

"That need not follow," said Florence.

"Oh, it would! I am impressionable and weak. You must not think that I am a strong woman because I chose this life, or that I chose it out of love for solitude and self-communion. I cannot help it," cried Helena, with a sudden passion that surprised her listener; "it is forced upon me."

"But——"

"There, there, Miss Andison, do not question me—do not ask me to explain," said Helena, interrupting her. "I have no story to tell. It

would be a miserable recital of regrets, and disappointments, and mistakes, were I to tell it, and you would not believe a word. Like the fairy tales, it is too wonderful," she added, bitterly.

"I will not ask another question," said Florence, kindly; "I do not wish to pain you. I am not an inquisitive woman; but you must take this assurance to heart, that I believe in you."

"You are very kind to say so."

"I believe in you," repeated Florence; "I trust you implicitly, in the face of all the mystery which it pleases you to wrap about your life."

"Which it pleases me!" cried Helena, ironically. "Yes, you are very young, and you have not learned to know the world at all. For what you know of me even, I may be simply an adventuress."

"I don't think I am a bad judge of character—young as I am," said Florence, with a naïve conceit at which Helena Shaldon smiled. It was a fair bright smile, that warmed the heart of Florence towards her.

"I wish that you would call me Florence for the time that I stay here," she cried; "till we

say good-bye to-morrow we may consider ourselves friends, I hope?"

"Yes," said Helena.

"I hate your 'Miss Andison this,' 'Miss Andison that' from people I like. Nobody calls me Miss Andison but the flunk—the servants," she said, correcting herself.

"Florence, then. It is a pretty name," said the other.

"I like Helena the better of the two. It's more stately—more romantic."

"You are at a romantic age," replied Helena. A maid-servant entered at this juncture.

"Miss Andison's room is ready," she said.

"Thank you. I will show Miss Andison to her room myself," said her mistress.

The servant withdrew, and Florence said—

"I am not going to my room yet, unless you wish it. Why, I am as wide-awake as an owl!"

"When you please, Miss Florence."

"Oh, that's like a gawky girl in frilled trousers? 'Miss Florence, will you have any more bread-and-butter before you are put to bed?' and that sort of thing. It is Florence—Floy—Flo—that's what they call me at home, and what you must call me here."

Helena laughed at her companion's remonstrance ; the colour came back to her cheeks, and there was more brightness in the big dark eyes. Surely this was a woman fitted for society, and to adorn society, thought Florence ; if she could only lure her back to it, as she had prophesied that she would to her brother Percy, what a triumph for her ! If Helena would only grow to be her friend in earnest, what a satisfaction to herself ! She had no real friend of her own age—only a heap of acquaintances who called at Hernley and made stately visits, and expected stately visits back again. And she had taken to Helena Shaldon unaccountably.

They passed an hour together talking. Helena was surprised to find how rapidly time had flitted by, when a gilt time-piece in the room chimed twelve o'clock. She rose at once.

"I promised Mrs. Graves that I would not sit up to-night—that I would leave the maid in the next room, so that she could call to her if she wanted anything," said Helena. "I am breaking my word, and my dear old friend will be very angry."

The "dear old friend" seemed almost mistress there, thought Florence Andison, shrewdly.

Was Mrs. Graves's will so strong and absolute that it cowed that of Miss Shaldon? she wondered—for Miss Shaldon seemed afraid of her.

"Shall we go upstairs now, Florence?" Helena inquired. "May I act as *chaperon*?"

"I'm not sleepy in the least," replied Florence. "I am a great talker—I should like to talk all night."

"We will rise early in the morning, if all's well," said Helena, "and stroll in the grounds before breakfast. Like a tenant-farmer, I will show you my improvements—only they will be improvements in my flower-garden and my fernery, my rockery and my aviary."

"We have a big aviary at Hernley—you must come and see it."

Helena shook her head.

"I mean when everybody is out, and you can slip in at the back-door," Floy said, laughingly, when Helena laid her hand upon her arm.

"You must not satirise the fate which keeps me to myself," Helena Shaldon said, sadly.

"I beg pardon. Oh! I am very sorry if I have hurt your feelings, Helena!" cried Florence, flinging her arms round her neck, and kissing her.

They went up the neatly-carpeted stairs, with their arms round each other's waists, more like sisters than friends—very unlike two women who were to see nothing of each other again after to-morrow. On the landing space, which was somewhat narrow, they paused.

“Wait for me,” said Helena; “I am going to Mrs. Graves's room—I must see her again.”

The door of the housekeeper's room was ajar, and Helena Shaldon pushed it silently open and walked in. The instant afterwards she came to the open doorway, and beckoned Florence towards her.

“Will you see how peacefully she is sleeping? You are not afraid?”

“Afraid? Not I,” said Florence, boldly.

She followed Helena, and stole with her to the bedside of the housekeeper. The room was full of shadow, although a light was burning on the mantelpiece, and Mrs. Graves was sleeping so peacefully, and looking so waxen and yellow in her sleep, that Florence grew suddenly nervous, and thought that the old woman was dead. She leaned forward quickly, and listened for the breathing, which was slow and regular.

Helena was an observant woman.

“You thought that she was dead?” she said, in a low whisper.

“Her appearance struck me as peculiar—I had hardly time to think,” said Florence, gazing at the face still, and half-disposed to shudder at it, it was so stern, and set, and strongly marked, with shades of blue beneath the sunken eyes, and signs of a moustache upon the upper lip. It was a deep sleep, but in the grim immobility of features there was a strange stamp of misery as well as firmness. Florence was glad when they had left the room—it was a face that would haunt her for awhile. She feared that she was not so strong-minded as she had anticipated.

“We have changed places to-night,” said Helena, sorrowfully; “and I come to see her in her sleep instead. As a rule, it is the old servant who steals to my bedside, and, if I am awake, asks if I am well.”

“I should not like that,” said Florence; “waiting for her would keep me restless.”

“I have grown used to it—it has been her habit for years. I seldom wake now, though I know when she is at my side even in my sleep.”

Helena looked in at the maid appointed to sit in the next chamber, said a few words, and

then led the way along a corridor to another part of the house.

"This is your room, Florence," she said, as they passed into another apartment, where a light was burning; "and here a whole army of birds, amongst the trees without, will sing to you when it is daybreak."

Florence looked round the room which they had entered. It was a spacious apartment, furnished with exquisite taste, and full of costly appointments—the boudoir and bed-room combined of a princess.

"This is your room," said Florence, quickly.

"At your service," answered Helena Shaldon.

"Oh! I will not disturb you like this."

"The best room for the visitor, and, if this is not the best, it is the brightest—to suit the bright and happy disposition which I can't help envying a little."

"I don't know that I am very happy," said Florence, thoughtfully; "I know that I am not miserable, and that it would take a great deal to dash me down. But I must not rob you of your room."

"My will is law in my own house," said Helena, decisively; "my room adjoins your own, and

that is the only one which I could change with you, if I were disposed to do so."

"Then why——"

"No, no, you must not sleep there," said Helena.

"Is it haunted?" asked Florence, laughingly. "If so, you had better share this room with me."

"It is haunted, after a fashion," was the enigmatic answer; "and I prefer to sleep in it, Florence. Should I get much sleep with your prattling here, do you think?" she added, with another of her rare smiles.

"Ah, you are as obstinate as I am," said Florence; "I see that."

"Are you very self-willed, then?"

"They tell me that I am," answered Florence, "but I don't believe it. Val thinks so too, I fancy."

"Who is Val?" asked Helena, curiously.

"Who is Val? Why, the gentleman—the nice-looking fellow—who was in the drawing-room this evening when you came for Doctor Dimsford," was the reply.

"I did not see him."

"He was on the couch."

“Yes, I remember now. A gentleman with his face turned from me, deep in the study of an album. And he is nice-looking, Florence?” Helena inquired.

“Very.”

“Is he engaged to Miss Florence Andison, of Hernley?” asked Helena, smiling. “Will she confess as much as that to me?”

“Yes; I am too proud of him to wish to hide it,” said Florence. “I was formally engaged to him to-day, but I have loved him—oh, ever so long!”

“What is he? A country gentleman—a nobleman? Why should not beauty like yours, and a position like yours, win an Earl for a husband?” cried Helena.

“He is a barrister.”

“A barrister!” repeated Helena, in so different a tone that Florence turned towards her from the dressing-table at which she was standing, drawing the rings from her dainty white fingers.

“Yes, and a very clever one too. I hope to live to see him Attorney-General at least.”

“What is his name?”

“Merrick—Valentine Merrick,” answered Florence.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RESTLESS WOMAN.

THE effect of Valentine Merrick's name upon Helena Shaldon was startling, and the Baronet's daughter did not fail to perceive it. She had been regarding her companion very steadily, and the sudden departure of the colour from her face, the dilatation of her eyes, the wild look in them which followed, and the quick impulse which took the small white hands to the bosom and kept them pressed there, surprised Florence. The instant afterwards Florence thought it might have been fancy, born of the late hours and that strain upon the nerves brought about by the novelty of her position and the house-keeper's illness at Weddercombe.

Miss Shaldon was smiling again, and the colour was returning to her cheeks.

"He will make you one of the best of husbands, I hope," she said.

"Do you know him?" Florence asked, quietly.

"The name is not unfamiliar to me—it surprised me," answered Helena, very calmly. "I knew a gentleman of the name of Merrick once."

"Where did he live?"

"In Yorkshire," she answered, after a moment's hesitation.

"Ah, that can't be my Valentine," said Florence; "he is always in town, or at his mother's house at Richmond."

"No—it cannot be the same," mused Helena; "the gentleman I mean was a stern, hard-featured, plain man, whom I disliked very much, and whom a girl like you would never fancy for a lover. Shall I bid you good night now?"

"I begin to feel a little tired, Helena."

"After all, I had no right to take you at your word and bring you to this place," said Helena, regretfully; "and you see that I do not require your assistance. Heaven forbid that I should, Florence!"

"Amen to that."

"I was selfish, and wanted company, that's all. Good night," said Helena.

Florence re-echoed her good night, and Helena left her.

In that room which Miss Shaldon had said was haunted in its way—what could she mean by that?—Florence heard her walking to and fro for a long and wearisome time that she thought would never come to an end. The walls were thin, and the mistress of the house had forgotten it; once, unless Florence's ears had deceived her, a low moan escaped the inmate of the next room, and Florence, too proud to become an eavesdropper, tapped lightly against the walls.

“What is it?” Helena asked at once from the other side of the partition.

“Did you call me?”

“No, child, no.”

“Are you speaking to yourself, then?”

“It is a bad habit of mine. You should have been asleep by this time, Florence. Good night once more.”

“Good night,” said Florence back again.

All was peace at last. Miss Shaldon had taken the hint thus delicately conveyed, and not a sound disturbed the silence which now reigned throughout the house. Florence took

one peep at the dark night; saw that the trees were very thick and close together, and that the branches were swaying to and fro in the night breeze a few feet from her window; after which survey of the woods that hemmed her in she extinguished the light and crept into her nest.

She wished that she had been less hasty, as she lay there very wide-awake and staring. In her own room at Hernley she objected to lamps or night-lights, and loved the night for itself; but at Weddercombe she thought that she might have been less precipitate with advantage. It was the force of habit that had led her to extinguish the light, and she regretted it, although she closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

She had not locked the room door, she remembered suddenly, and, as it was a strange house, and she was shut in with strange people, she considered that she might have exercised that amount of discretion at least. She smiled to herself at these thoughts the moment afterwards, and then endeavoured to forget them and go back in imagination to Hernley, and to Valentine, and to dreamings of that future life which her engagement with him foreshadowed. What a change it would be

from the Hall! She would have to live in London when she was married to Valentine, and she had always loved London—its life and bustle and gaiety and crowds of human kind. Not in a grand house—Valentine's income would not allow of that at present—but in a pretty neatly furnished dove-cot somewhere. Not with Valentine's mother; she remembered Valentine's mother coming to Hernley for a few days last Summer with her son, and how she had admired the tall stately gray-eyed lady with the soft voice; but she thought that she would not like her to live with her—to have her as part of her own home for ever and ever. Valentine loved his mother very much, but he was too sensible a man to oppress a young wife with a mother-in-law. Memorandum:—To drop the faintest and most delicate of hints that this would not be acceptable—to take the first opportunity of saying so.

She went to sleep after this, for how long a period she did not know, but she woke up with a start, with one of those half-nightmare plunges which suggest a fall from a house-top or a precipice into space, and she lay there with a galloping heart and an unpleasant feeling of having had quite enough of it.

Yes, there she was, very wide awake again, conscious that it was still dark, and disposed to be once more nervous, fancying by degrees that some noise in the room had awakened her, and trying to guess what it had been like. She distended her eyes and made out the window and the white lace curtains faintly in the darkness, and a glimmer of light upon the oval of the mirror on the dressing-table. That light became something to brood upon and grow nervous concerning as she lay there.

She had not observed it at an earlier period of the night; she was only sure that all was very dark before dropping off to sleep. If the door of the room were wide open, the light from an oil-lamp on a bracket on the landing-place at the extremity of the corridor might fall upon the mirror. The position of the dressing-table seemed to suggest that explanation; but then who had opened the door? She remembered Helena Shaldon closing the door and turning the handle. Who had opened it after she had gone?

This was an uncomfortable thought to oppress the mind of a young lady of eighteen, lying alone in a strange house, in which strange things had happened, and whose inmates were certainly a

little out of the common way. She wished that she had not come to Weddercombe—that she had not slept in Helena Shaldon's room—that she had exercised more precaution before retiring to rest, and turned the key in lock. She was nervous now, but she was not wholly dismayed as a boarding-school girl, oppressed by reminiscences of all her ghost stories, might have been under similar circumstances. She sat up in bed, after one little instinct to creep under the sheets till the morning, and looked intently at the mirror; and the story of what had scared Mrs. Graves and stricken her with a sudden illness suggested itself suddenly, and kept up the rapidity of her pulsations.

“Yes, the mirror had been so placed that the full extent of the corridor, with the lamp burning in the distance, was plainly seen within it like a picture. She was right; it was as her quick ideas had suggested; but here her hands clutched up the bed-clothes in her consternation, and brought them beneath her round little chin. Some one was proceeding slowly down the corridor towards the lamp—a tall figure in grey, whose garments trailed upon the floor as it receded noiselessly.

Florence's first impulse was to scream, her second to check that impulse, and to say clearly and sharply, but not too loudly, "Who is there?"

Second thoughts are not always best, perhaps; for, when the figure paused, as if Florence's voice in the stillness of the night had fallen on its ears and arrested further progress, she was sorry that she had spoken—exceedingly sorry when it turned, after a few moments' consideration, and came back with slow, regular steps in the direction of the room.

It was not the ghost which had scared the impressional Mrs. Graves, but Mrs. Graves herself—Florence was sure of that; and, of the two, she thought that she would have preferred the ghost, as the housekeeper came on with her rigid yellow face peering from the hood of a long waterproof cloak, and her grey hair trailing beneath it.

Was she mad? Doctor Dimsford had said so. Was she walking in her sleep? Was she ill again? Under any circumstances Florence thought that it would be advisable to lie down and draw the bed-clothes over her head; at that hour of the night she could not look at Mrs.

Graves. There would be time enough to scream and wake Helena Shaldon if necessary. She had lost seven-eighths of her courage, but the last fraction rendered her discreet even then.

Mrs. Graves came slowly into the room. Florence could hear the naked feet falling softly upon the carpet, and the hard, irregular breathing of the woman was close to her ear. Presently a large heavy hand was laid upon her shoulder.

“You called me, Helena,” said the low deep voice. “Cannot you rest to-night?”

“No,” said Florence, in a whisper.

She did not care to sit up and explain to Mrs. Graves that the estimable but eccentric lady was ignorant of the fact that a stranger was occupying Miss Shaldon’s room, at Miss Shaldon’s especial request—the less said the better, and the more speedily would follow the house-keeper’s departure.

“I have awakened you suddenly—you were sleeping calmly when I came in. Try to rest again.”

“Yes,” responded Florence, as Mrs. Graves seemed waiting for her answer.

"I am well, and very strong, dear," whispered Mrs. Graves. "You need not fear that I am going to die. I was frightened this afternoon by one from those old days which were so bitter to us both, and he scared me as a ghost might have done. I told the doctor that it was a ghost that had alarmed me," she added.

"Indeed," murmured Florence, as Mrs. Graves waited patiently for her response.

"You will fancy a hundred worse things than this if I do not tell you; and you and I must keep within doors for a while, lest he should recognise us—that's all. We are quite safe. Do not take your early walk in the grounds to-morrow, and all will be well. Here no one will perceive us."

She waited for her answer again, but Florence did not respond. The impulse was strong upon her to rise and explain, but an altercation would ensue with a woman who would be angry, perhaps, and resent her being there and listening to this strange communication. Moreover, it was possible that Mrs. Graves was asleep, and rambling in her sleep.

"I could not rest to-night without making sure that you were here—not watching for me

and wearing your life away with anxiety. Try to sleep again, dear, and remember to keep within the house. It is not Arthur—he will not break his word to me, Helena—but Merrick the barrister, the man who was cruelly unjust at York, and whom we cannot fear too much.”

Florence did not respond; her heart was beating very rapidly; the night was like a fragment of a dream.

“Asleep again,” said Mrs. Graves in a whisper to herself, “and I have disturbed my darling. Heaven spare this poor innocent from further trial! She has had enough for all her weary life.”

A heavy sigh followed this quick prayer; then the hand was removed from Florence’s shoulder, and the figure went slowly from the room, and along the landing-place.

CHAPTER XIV.

FALSE INFORMATION.

FLORENCE ANDISON did not sleep any more till daylight, although she got out of bed and locked the door very quickly after Mrs. Graves's departure. There was much to perplex her, and render her wakeful; in coming to Weddercombe she had stumbled upon the mystery of Helena Shaldon's life, and with that life, unless Mrs. Graves had been talking in her sleep, was connected her lover Valentine. She was not only wakeful, but disposed to be miserable. The gloom of the house had settled on her heart. Valentine had a mystery too, and concealed it from her. He had known Helena Shaldon before: he did not care to tell her so, or to confide in her; perhaps a year ago he had loved her very much—who could tell what are

the actions of these men when they are away from the women who trust them? It was a new and bitter axiom of Florence Andison's, full of worldly scepticism, from which she would have recoiled twenty-four hours since.

It was all very strange, but possibly Val would tell her everything; she was not in such a "dreadful hurry" that she could not give her lover breathing time at Hernley Hall before he made his revelation. He would tell her everything—of course he would—in good time. He had already hinted that he half disliked her going to Weddercombe, and perhaps Helena Shaldon had faults and failings of character that the future would reveal to her, as well as to Val Merrick. Perhaps he had always disliked Miss Shaldon, and never been in love with her, although it seemed so easy to love this dark-eyed woman with the gentle voice. She should be glad, for she would not like to hear that Valentine had ever loved, or had felt disposed to love, another woman—anything would be better than that!

In the early morning—which came at last, thank Heaven!—she fell off to sleep. She felt safer and less morbid when the daylight came,

and the birds had begun their chattering and chirping in the trees outside. She had thought out the story then, she hoped, and she was weary with it and her hours of wakefulness. She was sleeping soundly when a light hand tapped upon the thin partition of the wall which divided her room from Miss Shaldon's. Florence was soon awake, and thinking again of Mrs. Graves's vagaries.

"It is six o'clock, Florence," said the voice of Miss Shaldon from the adjoining room. "Will you come with me, or rest still? I am going for a stroll in the woods."

"I will come with you," Florence answered.

It was bright daylight, wherein fears subside and realities assume their fair proportions; but Florence did not care to be left with Mrs. Graves. She would be too glad to accompany Helena, she thought; but, when she was dressed in a morning robe, which she had brought with her in a small valise, she remembered Mrs. Graves's warning to her imaginary mistress to keep within the house. She might be assisting to betray Helena by not telling her everything—by accompanying her through the grounds of Weddercombe? Hardly, she

thought, after a little consideration—for, if it was Valentine Merrick of whom Mrs. Graves was afraid, he was a late riser, and left the early hours of the morning to folk more wakeful than he.

She was dressed when Helena Shaldon tried the handle of the door, which she found fastened.

“Ah! Florence,” she said, entering with a bright smile, born of a fair night’s rest, which Miss Andison had not enjoyed, “you lost your courage after I had left you, then, and locked your door!”

“Yes—I thought it was advisable,” said Florence, quietly.

“I envied your courage last night—I thought what a brave, strong girl you were, and how admirably fitted to cope with the world, and fight your own battles,” said Helena, regarding her half sadly; “and, after all, you are perhaps as nervous as I am.”

“There were noises in the house,” said Florence, “and I thought that I would shut them out.” “And Mrs. Graves along with them,” she added to herself.

“Very probably you heard me sigh in my sleep. My faithful old friend tells me that is a

confirmed habit of mine. Do you dream much?" she asked, almost irrelevantly.

"Sometimes."

"I am an awful dreamer—a martyr to dreams," she said, shuddering.

"It is the lonely life which you have chosen, Helena," Florence remarked.

"Perhaps so. Let us steal downstairs without waking Mrs. Graves—my maid tells me that she is sleeping soundly, and that is strange for her at this hour. Rest will bring back all her strength, I hope."

Again Florence Andison thought that she would relate the adventures of the night to Helena, and again she paused. Presently Mrs. Graves would tell all to Helena, and, if not, it would only disturb Miss Shaldon's mind to hear of the mistake. She would respect the secret, if it was a secret, that had been strangely betrayed to her a few hours ago. This fair girl had had enough trouble without her interference.

They went together out of the house and into the deep woods beyond it. It was a bright Summer morning, full of sunshine, and much of the gloom of Weddercombe had been dissipated by the glory of the day. In the ever-changing

lights and shadows which flickered about their path, in the golden haze filtering through the foliage, in the various tints and hues of the trees, there was more beauty than depression. That June day, Weddercombe was a place to love and live in—to find that peace of which Helena Shaldon had avowed she was in search.

There had been many improvements in the property since Helena had been mistress of it, and these were shown to her new friend. There was a picturesqueness in the surroundings that Weddercombe had not possessed in Colonel Chester's time; that gentleman had not studied pictorial effect, only the propagation and destruction of pheasants and partridges. A rockery of some extent had been erected in a remote part of the grounds, and here ferns had been planted in profusion, and various mosses, which Helena described at full length, though Florence was certainly no wiser for the explanation. There was an especial fernery also, of glass and iron, where were rarer specimens, requiring a warmer atmosphere, and beyond this was an aviary of considerable extent, that reduced the one at Hernley Hall to insignificance.

“You see that I shall be happy presently,”

said Helena, "following out my little hobbies, and content with that seclusion which suits my tastes and health better than society. I love Weddercombe already—I should be sorry to be compelled to leave it."

"Nothing is likely to compel you but your own desire for change," said Florence.

"Perhaps not; but a great misfortune, a great loss, would make me hate the place. From the house to which trouble has come, I have always fled away like a coward."

"You are impressionable."

"Yes. That is why I hide myself away from everybody," she replied, "playing bo-peep with society."

Helena Shaldon's spirits rose with the day. The bright morning, the fresh air, the assurance that Mrs. Graves was well again, the companionship—fleeting as it was—of one of her own age and sex, all tended to render her full of animation, and forgetful of her past.

How close the past came to her again when Mrs. Graves suddenly appeared at her side, there was no guessing at, but the face shadowed at the grim expression on the housekeeper's countenance. Mrs. Graves had put her big straw

bonnet on her head, and was not more pleasant to look at adorned in that fashion.

"You should have known better than this, Helena," she said, half sullenly, half reproachfully. "It is not acting wisely to come here."

"Why not?"

Mrs. Graves looked at Florence Andison, and said,

"It is early morning, and you are delicate."

"Have I not always taken an early walk, Mrs. Graves? Oh! my dear old friend," said Helena, with solicitude, "you are cross with me to-day—you are not quite well yet. It is you who should have rested within doors till my return."

"I am well enough," said Mrs. Graves, shortly.

"I am glad to hear it."

"I told you last night what had made me ill," said Mrs. Graves. "I came out—— Where did you sleep?" she asked, suddenly.

"In the red room, where the pictures are," answered Helena.

"And this—young lady?" indicating Florence with a quick gesture of her hand.

"In my room, Jane. Why do you ask?"

"I went to your room last night, then," she

said, addressing Miss Andison, and regarding her suspiciously. "Do you remember my coming?"

"Yes, I think I do," was the reply.

Florence saw the misery of suspense in both these women's faces, and thought that it would be better to evade the truth, if possible, and spare them. They would have no faith in her discretion; they knew very little of her, and it would be difficult to explain what she had heard. She did not think of how this secret might affect herself—she only felt that Helena Shaldon would be unhappy if she approached closer to it by one step.

"I spoke to you, and for a while you answered me," said Mrs. Graves, inquiringly, "and then were silent. Do you remember that?"

"I remember that I lay wakeful for hours, and then dozed off," said Florence; "perhaps you were part of the dreams I had."

Mrs. Graves did not ask any more questions. Her countenance did not clear, as Helena Shaldon's did; she was a more suspicious woman.

"Breakfast is ready," she said, abruptly; "it was laid before I left the house."

“We will return in a few minutes.”

“Will Miss Andison stay to breakfast?” asked Mrs. Graves.

“Certainly she will,” said Helena; “this is one of my neighbours of whom I am not afraid, Jane. She has been very kind. When she heard last night that you were ill, and when she saw that I was alarmed, she came to be of help, if help were needed.”

“We are indebted to Miss Andison,” said Mrs. Graves, in a low voice.

She walked away in the direction of the house, looking behind her once or twice to make sure that they were following her, and coming to a full stop again when she saw that they had turned suddenly from the direct path.

“They have strayed away!” she cried, stamping her foot passionately upon the ground. “Now if she only knew the danger she was braving, and that he may meet her at any moment here! What a fool I have been!—what a dullard—not to warn her, not to——”

She stopped, her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth, and a strange guttural sound, like the growl of an animal, escaped her, as she became aware of two gentlemen approaching from

the direction of the house. They were Valentine Merrick and Percy Andison, who had risen betimes and walked over to Weddercombe for the earliest news. They came on laughing and talking, the former looking right and left of him. Mrs. Graves pulled her bonnet more closely over her face and walked towards them, a woman at bay.

"Good morning, Mrs. Graves," said Percy, as they met; "for you are Mrs. Graves, I presume, whom I have the pleasure to congratulate on her rapid recovery."

"I was not ill—that is, not very ill."

"Bile, perhaps," Valentine Merrick remarked, lightly.

Mrs. Graves thrilled at the voice, but did not betray any outward or visible sign of emotion.

"Very likely, sir," she answered, in a cold tone; "I am naturally bilious."

"We were told at the house that Miss Shaldon and my sister were in the grounds, and that you had followed them," said Percy. "Do you know in which direction we are likely to discover the ladies?"

"I have not met them," said Mrs. Graves.

"Indeed!"

“They are not that way,” she said, with surprising coolness, considering the falsehood she was glibly telling; “I have been to the extent of the grounds in that direction. They have probably gone to the gamekeeper’s house—which lies over there.”

“Come, Val,” said Percy, turning at once.

“Can I deliver any message, gentlemen, should they return before you discover them?” she asked.

“Tell them that we will call in the course of the morning for Miss Andison, if you please,” said Valentine, politely, “and that we have simply strolled over now for inquiries.”

“Yes, sir.”

From the half-drooped eyelids the old woman peered for an instant at the barrister. He had not recognised her—he had forgotten her and her name; thank heaven that she had faded completely out of his memory! It was natural that he should not bear in remembrance the features of an old woman, humble and commonplace, and whom he had only seen once in his life, but she had recollected him and been terribly afraid of him.

The two gentlemen turned in the direction

which she took some pains to point out, and she watched them till the curve of the narrow path hid them from view, when she wheeled round and went back the way that she had come, taking long strides, and walking with her big strong hands clenched.

Out of sight of Mrs. Graves, Valentine suddenly caught his companion by the arm.

"Halt!" he said. "I am not going any further in that direction."

"This is the right path, Val," said Percy; "for Mrs. Graves said——"

"That old woman is a liar of the first class," said Valentine, before his companion could complete his sentence; "and she is sending us on the wrong road."

"Nonsense! With what object?"

"Pure, disagreeable, and malicious jesting," replied Merrick. "Mrs. Graves is a woman fond of a joke. Didn't it strike you that there was a roguish twinkle in her eyes? Last night's illness was a hoax. This morning's instructions are intended to hoax us also, or I am very much mistaken."

"You must be mistaken," said Percy, positively. "There is no earthly reason——"

“How do you know?” asked Val. “Miss Shaldon objects to company; her life is spent in dodging it, and Mother Graves gives all her valuable aid and assistance to the laudable object which her mistress has in view. Yonder is my way. Oh, confiding young philosopher! You can wend your steps in that direction if you please.”

“I’m not a betting man, but ten pounds to five that you do not find Miss Shaldon and my sister in that direction,” said Percy, with excitement.

“Done! And right about face!” cried Valentine, laughing, as he seized his friend’s arm and compelled him to accompany him on the path upon which he had made up his mind to find his *fiancée* and the mistress of Weddercombe.

CHAPTER XV.

DISCOVERED.

HELENA SHALDON and Florence Andison did not return immediately to the house after Mrs. Graves's announcement of breakfast. Amidst that fair landscape, and in the sunshine, they lingered yet, the one forgetting her mystery of sorrow, the other setting aside her suspicions. Years ago Helena Shaldon had been a light-hearted girl, and a visitor at Weddercombe was a great change, and a greater relief than she had even anticipated. In her heart she had taken already to Florence—it had leaped towards her on the first day of her acquaintance, when Floy had made her unceremonious entry into Weddercombe; and Floy's frankness, her trust, her freedom from all affectation, her beauty—so striking a contrast to her own—

added to the kindness which brought her there a second time as visitor—all attracted Helena towards her new-found friend. It was the natural re-action after life with Mrs. Graves, who was old and stern, and far from cheerful—a woman who did her best to brighten her mistress's life, but whose natural temperament rendered her efforts powerless.

Florence Andison, who had taken to Helena at first sight also, thought that all mysteries would be easily dissipated, and that she should love Helena Shaldon very much indeed. She could not reconcile this gentle, graceful, tender-hearted lady with deception, and she was sure that Valentine was the soul of honour. It would be easy to explain where and in what manner those two had met each other, if they ever had met each other—if it were not, after all, a mistake, which similarity of name had helped to create. At all events, she was not going to distress herself about impossibilities and contingencies and guesses wide of the truth—that was not like Floy Andison.

They were returning towards the house, walking very slowly, but discoursing very volubly—chirruping like the birds amongst the

branches overhead. Florence sustained the greater burden of the conversation, and flitted from subject to subject with grace and animation. Helena knew her whole life in this half-hour's wandering through the grounds together.

"I don't see, Helena, why this is to end—to collapse thoroughly, you know," she cried, enthusiastically, and forgetting everything but her liking for Helena, and her pleasure in her company; "if you don't care to enter society—even to come to Hernley—you might let me drop in here once a week, or twice a week, like this."

"I should be very glad if——"

Helena Shaldon paused, as if fearful to commit herself by any expression of opinion.

It was at this juncture that Mrs. Graves appeared before them again. She had succeeded in masking her emotion, and was as rigid as ever.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, madam?" she said, with grave politeness, to her mistress.

"Certainly, Jane. What is it? You will excuse me, Florence?"

Florence nodded her assent, and strolled on in advance. The paths were circuitous, and at

times of a maze-like complexity. A few yards took her out of sight of Helena and her housekeeper. She was scarcely out of sound, however, for she stopped suddenly as a faint half shriek came from the spot she had quitted. It was so quickly uttered, and so quickly suppressed, that Florence thought that it might be another of those fancies which had come upon her, thick and fast, within the last ten hours of her life. She paused to listen, and then went on a few more paces to pause and listen again.

Mrs. Graves came upon her then, and passed without a word, as though she had not seen her, and Floy retraced her steps to find Helena where she had left her, standing with clasped hands looking at the grass. One more fancy of hers, perhaps, but Helena seemed very pale, and with much of the light quenched from her face. She looked up as Florence approached, and smiled faintly, but with an effort.

"I have not kept you long," she said. "Shall we walk towards the house now?"

"If you wish. No bad news from Mrs. Graves, I hope?" Florence said.

"Oh no."

They went on in silence for a few more

yards, and then Helena said, suddenly and warmly,

“Miss Andison—Florence—the time may come more quickly than I fancied for you to hear a strange story about me and my life. Will you do me a favour?”

“Yes, I will,” answered Florence, readily.

“Thank you. Should you hear that story—which I pray you never may—don’t believe it, or else come to me to hear my answer to it. It is—every atom of it—full of prejudice, I swear!” she cried, with increasing fervour.

“Oh, Helena!” exclaimed the younger woman.

“Yesterday I would not have said as much as this—I would not have cared very much for your opinion of me; it would have been only one more, and I could have shrugged my shoulders and said, ‘Let her think so too—what matters it?’ Now,” looking at her trustfully, “I should like you to think well of me.”

“I will never think ill of you, Helena—I promise this with all my heart.”

Helena shook her head sadly.

“Oh, you are young and impulsive and im-

pressionable. I will not bind you to so rash a promise; I will only thank you for the warmth of heart which prompts the declaration. Still, don't believe it all if you can help it. Trust me for a little while, if you can."

"I don't see——"

"Hush! Do you hear voices?" asked Miss Shaldon, suddenly.

"I think I do."

"Men's voices, are they not?"

"Yes," said Florence, after listening again, "Percy's—and Val's!"

"They are early visitors; it would have been better if you had met them alone. But," she added, with a sudden pride that attracted Florence's notice, "I shall not run away from them."

"Run away—I should think not, indeed!"

"You must introduce me to this favoured swain—this Mr. Merrick," she said, lightly.

"I shall only be too happy," answered Florence.

They turned another curve of the serpentine path and faced the men advancing.

"Ten pounds to me," they heard Valentine Merrick say, as they approached.

“Confound it!—but does it not strike you as an odd proceeding?” Percy asked, in a low voice, which the ladies did not hear.

“Not at all,” answered Valentine in the same key.

The ladies and gentlemen met. Percy raised his hat and shook hands with Miss Shaldon; Valentine shook hands with Florence and raised his hat to Helena, regarding her very gravely and steadily.

Florence Andison was studying the first meeting also—she could not help it any more than she could help breathing—but she saw nothing to surprise her. Helena was self-possessed; she looked at Mr. Merrick with a grave composure, as a lady about to be introduced to a gentleman might look, and when Florence went through the customary formula, Helena bowed and said, calmly,

“You gentlemen are early visitors at Weddercombe.”

“We were anxious to know how Mrs. Graves had passed the night,” said Percy, “and were agreeably surprised this morning by finding that lady in the grounds. However, she——”

“Mrs. Graves has one of those strong con-

stitutions which quickly rally from a shock," said Valentine before Percy had completed his statement; "and it is satisfactory to think that Miss Shaldon is spared from illness in the house. An old and faithful servant, I presume, Miss Shaldon?"

"Yes, and one to whom I am greatly attached," said Helena, in reply.

"A faithful servant is a staunch friend rather than a domestic," observed Valentine. "You have a charming place here."

"It is a pretty place," was the answer.

"Is it not a trifle too dull, too secluded, for a lady?" Valentine inquired carelessly.

"I have my amusements here, Mr. Merrick, and I love seclusion," replied Helena, as they walked slowly in the direction of the house.

"A strange confession for one so young as you are, Miss Shaldon."

"Do you think so?" was the light reply.

The path was narrow, and it was impossible to walk four abreast; hence Percy and his sister preceded Miss Shaldon and Valentine Merrick. It was not as any of them had wished, with the exception of the barrister, who had ungenerously contrived that this should be the order of pro-

cession. It looked like accident rather than design, but it annoyed Percy Andison excessively, until his sister laughed at him, when he coloured highly and got into a rage.

"It's very selfish of Val to talk to Miss Shaldon in this way," said Florence, "when you have so few opportunities of saying a few words, too, my poor Percy. Upon my word I am inclined to be jealous myself, and say something sharp and bitter."

"Don't go on with that nonsense, Florence. They'll hear you in a minute."

"Not they. Miss Shaldon is far too much interested in Val's conversation. How they talk, to be sure!"

"I can't hear a word myself."

"Drop a few paces behind, if you want to hear what they are saying," said Florence quietly.

"You know what I mean, well enough," said Percy, indignantly—"that I cannot hear the sound of the voices—not that I wish to learn the subject-matter of their conversation. I don't believe that they are exchanging one syllable together."

He was right; they were walking side by side

in silence. The little formalities and conventionalities between two persons recently introduced had been gone through and had died out, and they had made no effort to keep each other amused. Miss Shaldon looked calmly before her, but Valentine observed her closely, as one might look at a statue or picture which he had failed to understand, and yet felt an interest in. Suddenly their pace slackened as if by common consent, and the distance between them and the couple in advance became much greater in consequence. When another sharp turn of the path concealed Percy and his sister from view, Valentine Merrick said in a low, deep tone,

“Do you remember me?”

The colour quitted the face of Helena Shaldon, and from the silence which followed it seemed to Valentine as if the one appealed to was summoning courage to deny all knowledge of him. He thought that he could read that hesitation in her; he was prepared for her opening more widely her dark eyes and affecting astonishment at his inquiry. It would be like her, taken at a disadvantage by the directness of his question. He waited patiently for her answer, and it came at length. The voice

was very firm; she had only been gathering strength to cope with him.

"Yes," she answered.

"You are not surprised to find me here?"

"No. My housekeeper saw you yesterday."

"The false name which you have assumed deceived me until I saw your face—that and the circumstances under which we met last are not likely to be forgotten."

"Do you consider it your duty to betray me?" asked Helena, scornfully. "Have I so deeply injured you," she added, with emphasis, "or are you so great a reformer of society that you will be the first to point me out?"

"The position has become complicated by your acquaintance with Miss Andison."

"I know it."

"I am engaged to be married to Miss Andison."

"I know it," Helena said once more.

"She has told you that already," said Valentine; "it is a rapid delivery of unimportant news. Miss Shaldon—I will call you Miss Shaldon for argument's sake," he said, decisively—"I don't wish to harm you, or to interfere with you in any way."

"Thank you, thank you," she cried, eagerly and gratefully. "I did not think you would be so merciless as to strike me down in cold blood."

"But, I was going to add when you interrupted me just now—though it is not my place to harm you or to say, if I can help it, one word against your past—I find you with my friends, living near them, and in disguise."

"Well?" she asked.

"I must have time to consider the position, now that I am convinced that Helena Shaldon and Helena Barclay are one. When can I see you again?"

"I am always at home."

"There are servants about—there is that woman Graves."

"I will be at the gamekeeper's house at eleven to-day."

"Where is that?"

"It is a ruin in the plantation on the left. There is no missing it."

"I will be there."

This was all that passed between them. They were both admirable actors, for as they emerged into the open they wore every-day faces, which told not of the depth and intensity of the secret

that lay between them. Florence saw nothing to excite her or render her suspicious. "They have never met before," shes aid to herself, assuringly; "it is all a mistake."

On the lawn in front of the house the four stood talking for a while, and Percy found his long coveted opportunity to address Helena Shaldon, to speak of the flowers and birds and ferns of which the place was full. Helena did not ask them into the house, and in this she was inhospitable, and the gentleman took this as a hint to go after a few minutes' further gossip.

"At what hour are we to drive over and fetch you, Florence?" inquired Percy. "That is, if Miss Shaldon will permit you to leave her."

"I have no excuse for detaining her any longer from her friends," answered Helena—"I wish I had," she added, with a sudden impulse, at which Percy and Florence smiled, and Valentine Merrick knit his brows.

"I don't think that I shall require any escort home," said Florence, "and, at all events, I shall not ride."

"Very well; but the sun will be hot presently."

"So it should be in June, Percy. Do you

want a cold sun by way of solar phenomenon?" she asked.

"I don't want my sister to hold up to ridicule the anxiety that I feel for her welfare," said Percy, in a reproving aside.

"All right, Percy—I'll take the hint. And if now you two young fellows take yourselves off," she added, in an aside too, "I shall get some breakfast—not without. There isn't a chance, my lad, of your being asked in to throw your sheep's eyes at her. I am paving the way, breaking the ice, by degrees—and that's all."

"For Heaven's sake don't talk slang! She will hear you, and think you are mad," cried Percy, in wild confusion.

"Valentine," said Florence, "if you and Percy should be straying across the fields between eleven and twelve o'clock this morning, you will probably meet me. I shall adopt the cross-country route by way of preference to the high-road; and my compliments to papa, and if he sends the carriage I shall not get into it."

With this saucy message the ladies parted from the gentlemen, and Helena and Florence sat down to breakfast.

Helena was thoughtful, though she tried hard

not to be, and Florence used all her exertions to render herself agreeable. There had been much mystery to meet her in this house; even in the grounds that morning it had confronted her, and Helena's late excitement had perplexed her vastly; but she had been assured that it was all a mistake, that Helena had met, at some time or other, another Mr. Merrick, and that in a few days she would know the length and breadth and depth of all this complication. Helena was fearful of being talked about—perhaps of some wretched scandal or calumny by which she had suffered coming to her ears before she could explain it satisfactorily—and her nervous susceptibilities had made a mountain of a mole-hill. As if she could not trust Helena Shaldon—as she was sure that she could—as if her faith in her would not always stand the test!

When she was going—and Helena was looking very wistfully at her—she burst forth with,

“I wish that you would tell me all now.”

“All what?” asked Helena, knowing full well, but taken aback by the outspokenness of Florence.

“All your life; and let me help you if I can, and—if you want help.”

“You may help me with your confidence some day, if there should arise a need to tell you my history, which I pray may never be the case.”

“Yes, you have said that before,” said Florence thoughtfully.

“It would distress you, for it is a history of sorrow, as you already guess,” she continued. “There, go now, Florence, and don’t ask me any more questions. Thank you for your kindness—for the blessing of that companionship which will not come again.”

She flung her arms round her, and kissed her many times.

“Not again,” repeated Florence, “when the companionship and friendship are beginning?”

“You will never think so well of me as you do at this moment, with your hands in mine,” said Helena; “I am easily suspected—and suspicion comes so soon. Still, Heaven bless you, Floy!”

Thus the two girls parted from each other, and Helena from the window of her drawing-room watched the fair-haired daughter of the Andisons pass from her. It struck eleven as she stood there. She went from the room, and

returned with her garden hat upon her head.

"Now for the worst," she murmured, as she stole away into the depths of the woodland lying beyond her quiet home.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WOMAN AT BAY.

HELENA SHALDON was the first to arrive at the rendezvous agreed upon between her and Mr. Merrick in their whispered conference. The barrister was not punctual, or had altered his mind, or had resolved to spare her the pain of such an interview as this must be perforce, and Helena had the place to herself.

It was a lonely spot ; the old gamekeeper's lodge had become part of the still life of the landscape, and was a gloomy edifice falling fast to ruin. Imaginative beings at Weddercombe would have called it haunted, but Weddercombe folk had sufficient real troubles to leave the unreal to itself, and the present run of mind of its inhabitants was to unmitigated dulness, in which no fancy existed.

In the bright June sunshine the deserted game-keeper's lodge was picturesque enough, with its moss-grown thatch, its black timber sides over which the ivy trailed profusely, its lattice windows blinking here and there, and its background the quivering green of a hundred trees. It was only in the damp Autumn and the fierce Winter that the place was depressing under its aspect of neglect.

There had been a fierce storm last Winter in this part of the country, and some of the trees at Weddercombe had been levelled by the blast; one large fir lay still across the garden fence, which it had crushed down by its weight. As it had fallen in the tempest so it lay there still, with its branches ragged and unlopped. On the trunk of this tree Helena Shaldon sat and waited for the coming of her persecutor. Yes, he would be her persecutor, she saw, and there would never be rest for her again. She must succumb to Fate, or defy it; and in either case peace was on the eve of passing from her. She had come to Weddercombe for it, but the odds had been against her from the first.

"It is impossible that such a man as he will spare me," she thought as the time passed by,

and it was a quarter past eleven by the little gold watch which she consulted. "Surely," with a shudder, "he is as cruel as he looks—as he was on that awful day last year. He is sure to come."

She sat there very patiently ; as time stole on there was no effort to escape, and no hope of release from persecution. She was in the toils, and must bide his time to come to her. It was deep thought in which she submerged herself at last, forgetting time and place, the object of her waiting, and the tardiness of him for whom she waited. His appearance at her side came upon her at last as with a surprise for which she had not prepared herself ; she looked at him with dismay when she became aware that he was standing a few paces distant, with his keen grey eyes fixed on her.

"Oh ! you are here," she exclaimed.

"Yes. I am sorry that I could not keep my appointment to the minute, but I was detained upon my road," said Valentine, advancing—"I met Miss Andison."

"I regret it," returned Helena.

"It is a matter of no consequence," he said. "May I sit down by your side?"

"If you are not afraid of me," she answered; "for I am a dangerous woman."

He regarded her attentively as he sat down on the fallen tree.

"No," he said, slowly, "I am not afraid of you. I do not suppose that it would be worth your while to get rid of my objectionable knowledge at one blow."

"Such a woman as you think I am would not hesitate to do it," answered Helena, in the same mocking tone.

"Such a woman as I think you are would be extremely cautious in getting rid of evidence in that fashion," said Valentine.

Helena Shaldon clasped her hands together, and compressed her lips before facing him again.

"Be brief, Mr. Merrick," she said. "Tell me what I have to fear, and then leave me to the misery which you have helped to create."

"Which I have helped to create!" he repeated. "You forget that that misery is of your own making, and that I have had no hand in it."

"You have—you have!" she cried twice, passionately.

"In the way of business I have expressed my

opinion on your conduct—I could not help that, Miss Shaldon. Shall I say Miss Shaldon?”

“Call me what you please.”

“You were Helena Barclay when we met last. Why do you come to Weddercombe under an assumed name?”

“Is it not natural that I should wish to escape that name you mention? Innocent or guilty, would I choose to bear it and its shame one moment longer than it was in my power to cast it off?”

She spread forward her hands impulsively, as though she cast from her the brand of which she spoke, and Valentine Merrick watched her with increasing intentness. She was a study of character in which he was deeply interested.

“You would have done better to leave England,” said Valentine, thoughtfully; “here there is not room to hide yourself.”

“Oh! sir, I am not in hiding,” she cried, scornfully, “and scarcely in disguise. As Helena Shaldon I was known for the first sixteen years of my life, and I have come back to it again, as though the peace that belonged to the old days might come back with it. But you will not understand my motives—you have mis-

understood and prejudged me. I am not here to explain—to you of all men!”

“I do not seek an explanation,” he replied.

“Tell me what I am to expect from you, then,” she said, impatiently.

“I told you a short while since that I had no wish to harm you, or to utter, if I could help it, one word against you,” he said. “Heaven forbid that it should be my province to hunt misguided women to death!—but I find you Miss Andison’s friend.”

“She is no friend of mine,” said Helena.

“She is young and impressionable—she has taken a strange fancy to you; the mystery about you even helps to attract her—she has faith in you, and a woman’s love for you.”

“Heaven bless her for it!” cried Helena Shaldon, looking upwards. “She sees the truth more clearly in her innocence and faith than you with all your cunning.”

“She has not heard the truth.”

“Or that version of the case which you will consider it your duty to impart to her,” said Helena scornfully again.

“Not if you leave Weddercombe.”

“Leave here!” cried Helena, “That, then, is the condition of your silence?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you hound me from this place?”

“In the interest of her to whom I am betrothed,” he answered, sternly; “even in the interest of my friend her brother, who is weak, poetical, and imagines a story about you that is as unreal as your life. I have no wish to be hard upon you, but you must leave here.”

“If I consent never to speak to Miss Andison again—never to see her?”

“She is self-willed—she will seek you out—complications must arise, and much mortification to her, and new misery to you,” he said. “Take my advice, madam, and quit this part of the country, where chance has brought us thus strangely face to face again. Quit England, and seek in a new life some atonement for a dreadful past. You were very young—you were sorely tempted—you——”

“Stop!” cried Helena, passionately. “I will not hear another word of your counsel—I reject it, and your sympathy. Of my life, of my heart, of that dreadful past to which you drag me back, you know nothing—you never did know!”

“Well, well,” said Valentine, shrugging his shoulders, “it is sufficient for me to say that you

and Florence Andison cannot be friends—that if you remain here it will become my painful duty to warn her of you—to reveal the facts so far as I am acquainted with them, and leave her own judgment to decide.”

“Tell her what you please,” said Helena, more firmly still; “I remain at Weddercombe.”

“Very well,” said Valentine, rising.

“I would have shut myself away from all the world if it had been in my power,” said Helena, rising also; “not from fear of the world’s opinion, which, God knows, I value not now, but in the hope of rest. You have forced me back to the light—you believe the worst of me; now do your worst and leave me. Here I hold my ground, or die.”

She waved her hand in the direction of the Andisons’ estate, as if indicating the way that he should take; in her indignation, her defiance, she was very beautiful, and he felt like a coward who was waging war against a defenceless woman, whose past career it would be merciful and manly to conceal. But she was dangerous and deceptive, and must not be Florence Andison’s friend. The result of such a friendship it would be impossible to foresee, or, to prepare

against. He felt deeply for the woman, driven thus to bay, but he must stand as shield between her duplicity and Florence.

“If you would only go away!” he said again.

“I have taken my last stand, and the veil before my past and me may drop when it pleases,” she replied. “When the time comes I may tell my own story in defence to those who have thought well of me, but never to you. If they condemn me, I can bear it.”

He bowed, but made no answer. He was startled and impressed, but the facts came back to his memory with tenfold force, and her very manner told against her, and warned him of her dangerous deceptiveness. He was a barrister, he had studied human nature from a prisoners’ dock point of view, and he trusted only in evidence and honest witnesses. There was no theory that could make Helena Barclay different from what she was to him.

He was moving away slowly, when she turned to him again.

“If, despite my mysterious life, Miss Andison has trusted in me—as she has—I claim the right to tell her the truth,” said Helena; “you will only be my accuser, not my judge.”

"All this might be spared you if——"

"If I would leave Weddercombe; but I shall not," she answered. "I have said so—I shall never change my mind. Miss Andison——"

"Miss Andison must not see you again."

"I have to be consulted on that little matter, I think," said a clear sharp voice behind them; and then Florence Andison stepped from amidst the deep belt of firs which girdled that portion of the estate.

"Florence!" exclaimed Valentine, half in surprise, half in anger. "You have followed me—you have suspected me!"

"I am not a heroine, as Miss Shaldon is," said Florence, tetchily; "and I am not to be deceived, as you and this lady may have imagined. I did suspect that you knew each other, although I tried hard not to do so; and your excuse for leaving me and coming this way, Valentine, was so poor a one that I naturally doubted you. You must excuse my ill-breeding,—but I followed."

"I am very sorry for this," said Valentine Merrick, with deep gravity.

"I have not listened," added Florence, hastily. "You will do me the justice to believe

that I do not care for the secret that there is between you two, if it pleases you to keep it to yourselves; I think even that it is a paltry little mystery, easily explained, and that I have a right to an explanation, though I do not ask you for it, Miss Shaldon, and hardly expect that you, Val, will refuse me, unless——”

There was a wistful look in the violet eyes as she hesitated, but Valentine was staring on the ground, and stirring last year's dead leaves with his walking-stick. He was under suspicion also—he, a man so proud of his honour, so strong in his defence of right, to be distrusted by a girl who had whispered of her faith in him only yesternight, to be followed to this spot too, and to be compelled to drag into the daylight that long array of facts which would utterly crush down another woman! He was an obstinate man, and had long ago waged war against dictation. From her who was to be his wife he had expected the most implicit trust, and she had turned upon him already. True, the position was peculiar, and he was with another woman in Weddercombe Wood; but Florence Andison should not have doubted him!

“Miss Andison must take my word that I am here in her interest, not in my own, or Miss Shaldon’s,” he said coldly as she paused; “presently I may explain more fully,”

Florence shrunk back at his words, and glanced from him to Helena. It was the latter who was the least embarrassed of the three now.

“I will explain, Miss Andison,” she said.

“No, no!” began Valentine, when she interrupted him.

“I will have my way in this; I will not leave all explanation to you, unless she should wish it afterwards. Miss Andison,” she said, turning to her, and speaking with a firm, unfaltering voice, “it is in your interest alone that Mr. Merrick is here. He is afraid that I am no fit companion for you. Twelve months ago I was tried for my life at the York Assizes, and Mr. Merrick was the counsel for the prosecution.”

“For—for your life!” gasped forth the astonished Florence.

“Yes,” said Helena, still very firm and strong, —“on a charge of wilful murder!”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TERRIBLE PAST.

IT was a revelation totally unlooked for by Florence Andison in her wild guesses at the mystery of Helena Shaldon. She had never associated the lady of Weddercombe with an idea of crime. A family quarrel, a secret marriage, a strange misunderstanding that time would rectify, a wrong that time might render right, a cruel father, a step-mother—anything in the way of romance her imagination had suggested, but nothing of the semblance of this awful truth which fell from Helena's lips in the hour of her self-denunciation. A faint cry of astonishment, of horror, escaped her; then she went, pale and trembling, and forgetful of her past suspicions of her lover, to Valentine's side, and linked her trembling hands upon his arm.

“Oh, Val, is this true, or is she mad?” she murmured.

“It is true.” Valentine Merrick answered.

“And you would have spared her—you——”

“I wished her to leave Weddercombe,” said Val. “I saw the harm that might arise from your want of knowledge of her history.”

“Yes, yes; I see all now.”

“You see nothing, Miss Andison,” said Helena; and at the sound of her voice Florence started, and clung more closely to Val’s side. “But you are afraid, and a terror of me is already at your heart. You cannot help that, poor child, and I forgive you for it freely. I said this morning, Florence,—if I may call you by that name again,—that suspicion would come soon, and that you would never think so well of me as you were thinking then, for I knew that such a bitter hour as this was on its way towards us. Only a few minutes ago,” she added, sadly, “I thought it was an easy task to tell my story after my own fashion. But there, let it go—I will not attempt the impossible. I leave the history to him who, in his own conceit, knows me thoroughly. I am too proud now to say another word.”

She bowed, and walked slowly from them, and neither man nor maiden essayed to stop her. She did not waver in her progress; all the past passion and excitement had vanished from her face, leaving it as white and cold as marble; the worst had come, and she had found strength to encounter it, and a pride to resist the rush of its oncoming. She passed from them with a conscious self-dignity and power that were remarkable to witness, remembering the frail, weak girl of last night, and was, even in that hour, a greater mystery.

“That is an extraordinary woman,” muttered Valentine, looking after her. “I could understand her innocence—I could understand her firmness and crime——”

“Oh! Val—what is it? Tell me everything.”

“After all, is it necessary?” he said. “Is it fair? Now that your suspicions of me are set at rest, cannot we let that poor woman’s life rest too?”

“My suspicions! Ah! Val, you are angry with me and my jealousy. But I could not help it, and you were not placing confidence in me.”

“There, we will not say anything more about it,” he said, passing his arm round her, and kiss-

ing her lightly on the cheek; "but it is a bad beginning of our engagement to distrust me, Floy. As for my confidence—would you have me unburden all my professional secrets to you, Floy, and smother you with last year's briefs?"

"No; but Helena Shaldon was my friend, and——"

"And I wished to arrest that friendship, without injuring her if I could," he said, as they proceeded towards the meadow-land of Hernley. "I would have let her pass away, and spared you both. The Fates were against it, and here we are."

"Tell me about her. Let me try to understand her. She said 'wilful murder,' Val," said Florence, shuddering—"the wilful murder of whom?"

"Of her husband, Michael Barclay."

"Married!" exclaimed Florence.

"Yes—fancy a woman shunting her husband by express into the siding beyond this life, Floy."

"Oh! don't talk like that—don't jest at such a horror as this has been," Florence implored.

"I forgot myself. I am like a doctor, old and tough, and unimpressionable, and Helena Bar-

clay's case is only one out of a hundred, with nothing very new about it. It should not affect either you or me—we have nothing to do with it."

"I liked her so much! Oh! Val, perhaps she was innocent! I think she must have been. Did not the jury acquit her? Does she look like a woman who could take her husband's life? How was it? Tell me everything, and let me judge for myself."

"I expect the papers by the next post from London, and you may study the details then if you will," he said. "I should like to look over them myself, and grope in the dark for extenuating circumstances, as I should have done had I been the counsel in her behalf."

"Well?" said Florence, as they went on together. They had passed through the shrubbery, and Valentine had lifted his lady-love over a wire fence, and the broad fat lands of Hernley lay between them and home.

"Well, Miss Inquisitive," said Valentine, "I am not going to make a long story out of this; the simple facts will take me three minutes, perhaps, and I must leave speculation concerning them to you."

"Go on, please," said Florence, impatiently.

“Helena Shaldon married Michael Barclay ; ‘she was young, and he was old’—she was poor, one of the reduced-circumstances division of the grand army of the unlucky, and he was abominably rich. People wondered, I believe, why she married him, for all that, for he was a brute, and had led his own nephew and adopted son a nice life of it, before he took it into his head to ask Helena Shaldon to become his wife.”

“Well?” said Florence again.

“He married Helena, and treated her with greater cruelty than he had done his nephew ; he was certainly an old savage, but women marry savages at times, and are faithful to them, and grow to think them beauties. In this instance old Michael Barclay died suddenly, a few weeks after he had made a will in favour of his wife, and it was found, upon opening the old gentleman, that he had taken prussic acid enough to kill a bullock.”

“Oh, don’t talk like that !”

“Merely my professional way, Floy,” said Valentine ; “I can’t pump up any great measure of pity for old Barclay, a man whom I never saw. That’s the story.”

“Not all.”

“Very nearly. Suspicion pointed to the young wife; little things gathered strength and became ugly proofs of evidence; and, if it had not been for much false swearing on the part of Mrs. Graves—there is no doubt that she lied amazingly to get her mistress off—Mrs. Barclay, *née* Shaldon, would have certainly been hanged. There was a failure of justice; Mrs. Graves’s evidence was not thought to be false till after the trial, and Helena Barclay was pronounced not guilty. I made a splendid speech, Floy,” he continued—“you shall read that to-morrow too—and the judge summed up against her; but the Yorkshiremen were hard-headed and resisted facts. Spinks, for the defence, talked a great deal of youth and innocence, of sentencing to death one so weak and fragile as the prisoner, of the responsibility of condemning her—and her FACE saved her. It was her FORTUNE. It brought her money the first time—it saved her life the second.”

“And you are sure that Helena Barclay poisoned her husband?” said Florence.

“As sure as I can be of anything upon earth.”

“But her denial of it—her courage at the last—that look upon her face, Val.”

"Her face again!" laughed the barrister.

"I cannot believe her to have been so desperate a woman then, to be so deceitful a woman now."

"Old Barclay treated her very badly, and she was driven mad by his cruelty and suspicions—that's the truth, I imagine, Floy," said Val. "I don't say that she was not very sorry afterwards, that she is not very penitent for all the past, but she is no fit companion for Floy Andison; and I told her so this morning."

"And she?" questioned Florence.

"Defied me—ordered me off the premises—acted the injured heroine to perfection," he answered, "and very nearly imposed upon my own flinty heart. Yes," he added, thoughtfully, "she is a dangerous woman; we must warn Percy of her too."

"Poor Percy!" said Florence with a sigh. "There is another whom it will be difficult to gain over to your version of the legend."

"Another! Are you not convinced yet?"

"No," said Florence, boldly.

"The natural perversity of the feminine intellect, that is beyond all reasoning and is dead to argument!" cried Valentine, laughing.

“Where is this nephew—the adopted son—the man who was treated badly by Michael Barclay?” asked Florence.

“I don’t know anything of him.”

“Why was not suspicion directed towards him?” asked Florence, eagerly. “Did he bear a good character?”

“Rather a bad one, I believe—half profligate, half spendthrift. He was one of the principal witnesses against Mrs. Barclay, and he gave his evidence with regret, but with much frankness and fearlessness. It was the one blot on the case that the counsel for the defence sought, by implication, to throw the guilt upon him.”

“If the nephew were a revengeful man now,” said Floy Andison—“if the counsel’s idea was correct after all?”

“Spinks—that’s the barrister of whom we are talking—never thought her innocent from the first. He fought her case well, and got her off, and it has lifted him up in the profession vastly—but he never believed in her. He and I have had many a joke about our battle on the Northern Circuit last year. It was a victory for him—but it was not fairly won.”

“This is dreadful,” said Florence, shuddering.

"It is not a cheerful story to consider," answered Valentine.

They were silent for some time after this; they went on side by side, each pondering on the problem of human life, each construing it after a different fashion, and marvelling at the strangeness of the incidents that had brought the tragedy to Weddercombe, and set it down in that peaceful country place, to scare all honest folk there.

"Oh, Val," said Florence, suddenly, "if she should be innocent—if, after all, you and the world are wrong, and she is right—what misery she has borne and suffered from and fought against! It would account for her manner, her nervousness, her strangeness; I can reconcile her life and gentleness, her courage and pride, with innocence, but not with such a crime as you believe her guilty of."

"What, not yet convinced!" said Valentine, laughing.

"Not yet," cried Florence, with excitement.

"The facts—which you shall see, Floy—are against her; and I believe in facts. But, if I allowed my imagination play," he said—"if I dared to do it—if I were romantic or confiding,

were younger even at the Bar—I should believe in Helena Barclay.”

“Then you are not surprised, Val, that my faith is not completely shaken?”

“No. For a moment to-day I was weak enough to think that she was a deeply-injured woman,” he answered; “but it was only for a moment, Floy.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIRST FRIEND.

THE brighter days at Weddercombe had soon died out, along with its mistress's hopes of a fairer and more peaceful time. In six fleeting months the vision had faded, and she was facing the old truths, from which there was no escape in England. She had shunned society, but society had found its way to her, brought with it the terrible accusation that had already rendered life a burden to her. She had been tried for murder, and the verdict of "Not guilty" had been followed by the derision of a sceptical community. The newspapers had sneered at the escape, and sifted, with cruel acrimony, the evidence that had saved her; and the world was a barren place, wherein she could find no shelter, nor meet with one friend. To know her history

was to set men's hearts against her; she had seen that from the first, and she had fought hard, and with a woman's cunning, to submerge her past. Accident had betrayed her, and she was in the glare of the noonday sun again.

So be it; she had done her best, and failed. She had grown very weary of the chase; she would lie down and die now, making no further effort at escape. They who doubted her in this new strange sphere into which she had entered should see at least that she did not steal away from them; here at Weddercombe was her last stand-point, where she would fight out her life. She told this, and more than this, to the house-keeper, Jane Graves, who sat with her all that day in the drawing-room, and listened to the news. Friend rather than attendant, mother rather than friend, the old woman was always at her best when the young one was stricken down.

Mrs. Graves heard all with attention; she argued with philosophy; she scoffed at man's detraction and false judgment; she pointed out once more, with a rough eloquence that was touching and forcible, that after all it was only the old position—they two together to

believe in one another, and leave the world to think what it pleased of them—at least, it was no worse than it had ever been.

“Ah, I don’t know that,” said Helena, with a sigh.

“Where is the difference?” asked Mrs. Graves.

“Don’t ask me. Tell the servants, Jane, that my name is Barclay, not Shaldon. I have given up for good!” she cried, half restlessly, half defiantly.

“Given up attempting to hide yourself and your past trouble. Well, I asked you to do that a year ago,” said the housekeeper. “Changing your name was a confession of weakness, almost of guilt, to such little-minded folk as we have met at Weddercombe.”

“Sometimes I think that you do not believe in me, Jane,” said Helena, timidly—“that you see only a young woman who was driven to desperation by much unkindness, and who snatched at liberty by any means.”

“You should judge me better than that,” said Mrs. Graves, reproachfully.

“For you saved my life——”

“By swearing that you were not in the house when Michael Barclay died. Ay, it was rank

perjury, Helena. Heaven forgive me, if it will, knowing that I did it to save you from the evidence that was turning against you!"

"Arthur's," said Helena, shuddering; "ah, that dreadful man!"

"It is you who mention him, not I," answered Mrs. Graves sullenly.

"Well, well, the worst has come, and we are not wholly stranded, Jane," Helena cried, with sudden animation. "See how strong and brave I am beneath it all. I said that I had given up—on the contrary, I resist. The reality is not so bad as the fancies which have haunted me."

Mrs. Graves was not deceived by the new manner which had been assumed by Helena Barclay—to give her the name bestowed in her unlucky marriage. Helena was variable in her moods; there would come a time of deep despondency again—it would be natural to the woman hunted by her kind. She was not strong enough to keep always strong, and of the reaction the housekeeper was afraid. Still, Helena had fought bravely, and the reality was not very terrible. What was the opinion of Miss Andison, or Miss Andison's friends, after

all? Helena had never sought their companionship; she had held aloof from them. It was they who had sought her out, and by their interference brought about the truth.

"No, the reality is not so bad," said Mrs. Graves; "fearing for you shook me down yesterday; and yet this Merrick can do us no harm. We can defy him."

"A hard, cruel man," murmured Helena. "I see him looking at me still, and hear his voice of accusation—it has been ever ringing in those dreams of mine which I cannot escape from—dreams of that awful dock, where I was standing with all eyes turned on me. Oh! the eyes!" she cried, spreading her fair hands suddenly before her face.

"Courage, Helena—you have promised to keep strong, my poor weak child, whom a breath of calumny seems to wither suddenly."

The old woman put her big strong arm round the neck of her young mistress, and drew the head upon her broad breast, where she whispered soothing words and kindly counsel, until her eyes closed, and Helena slept as an infant might have done, tired out with the crosses and disappointments of its fretful little life.

It was a striking picture in the subdued light that shone from the waxen candles on the table—the fair and youthful countenance in close contiguity to the deeply-lined visage of the elder woman sitting there, incongruous and out of place with the surroundings of a luxurious home, rugged and immovable in her watch, and hardly seeming to breathe, lest she should wake her who had dropped off to sleep upon her breast.

They sat there for an hour without an intrusion on their peace, and then the door opened softly, and a maid-servant stole on tip-toe into the room, as if such scenes as this were not uncommon, and to be prepared for.

Mrs. Graves held up one hand in warning, despite the cautiousness with which the maid had proceeded towards her, and a deep “Hush!” was hissed from her thin lips. The servant stopped.

“What is it?” asked Mrs. Graves in a low whisper.

“A visitor.”

“I did not hear a knock.”

“I met the gentleman in the garden-ground beyond, and told him that my mistress was un-

well, and could not see him, but he would insist that I should bring in his card," explained the maid, in a quick and hurried tone of voice.

"Tell him to go—tell him that she is ill, and cannot, under any circumstances, be seen," said Mrs. Graves.

"Stay—what is it? What has happened now?" cried Helena, suddenly sitting up, with her dark eyes dilated, and her face full of anxiety and inquiry. "I will have nothing kept back from me—I told you that I was very strong!"

The servant-maid held forth the salver containing the card which Mrs. Graves had not deigned to inspect, and Helena took up the card and read it.

"Mr. Percy Andison," she read aloud, as she looked down on the carpet, and thought deeply. "Show him in," she said at last; "I will see the gentleman."

"Helena!" cried Mrs. Graves, in astonishment.

Helena Barclay smiled; there was a strange, set expression on her features at that moment.

"You forget, Jane, that I have not given up, but that this is a fight against fate. Here is my first opponent," she said, bitterly.

"Ay, if you can keep strong," said Mrs. Graves, "this may be as well. I will stay with you."

"No, leave me to myself. You need not fear that I shall be a child before this weak young man," said Helena, somewhat scornfully.

"As you will," muttered Mrs. Graves, rising; and, as Percy Andison entered, she passed from the room, and, after one glance askance at him, shut him in with her young mistress.

She was a woman of no fine feelings, however; strange associations, time, indifference to the world's opinion, had all marred them long ago, and she took up her stand on the other side of the door, folded her arms, leaned her head against the panel, and set herself to listen diligently. She was not a curious woman; and it was with no idle wish to gather up the scraps of conversation from within that she took her position there.

A few minutes' eavesdropping satisfied her that Helena was not likely to give way.

"The lassie will keep brave before the likes of him," she said, as she marched away down the corridor, "and I'm not wanted here."

Meanwhile, Percy had approached Helena

with much manifestation of anxiety on his pale, sharp features. He was in full dress beneath his grey overcoat, like a man who had risen in haste from the dinner-table or drawing-room to visit her; and when he sat down in the chair to which the mistress of Weddercombe had waved her hand, it was evident that he was trembling nervously.

Helena observed this, and was surprised. The man before her was a pedantic, absent, old-fashioned prosaic kind of being, she had fancied, not one prone to be excited in any way, even by such news as had been detailed to him, and which she read upon his face.

"You are astonished at my unceremonious visit," he stammered forth.

"I am used to surprises, Mr. Andison. Last night, if you remember, I surprised you and your friends," said Helena, with great calmness.

"Yes, Miss Shaldon; but——" He paused as she held up her hand to stay his further speech.

"They will tell you at Hernley that I am a widow lady of the name of Barclay, and that there remains at Weddercombe no further necessity for disguise. They have already told you," she added, with asperity.

“Yes,” he confessed.

“Your friend Mr. Merrick has been quick with his information,” said Helena. “He did not threaten me in vain. He is a man of his word, whom you should value very highly, for such men as he are scarce.”

“Let me do him the justice to assert that I have insisted upon the truth—that it was only by my fixed determination to learn everything that had distressed my sister and him——”

“And him!” echoed Helena.

“That I have ascertained all that has occurred,” continued Percy, without taking heed of her second interruption.

“And the reason that urges you, Mr. Anderson, to pay me the honour of a second visit on this memorable day?” inquired Helena.

“Ah! you cannot guess that—you will not guess that!” he cried.

“I am at a loss to conjecture,” said Helena, after regarding the gentleman attentively, “unless you are instructed to demand my immediate departure from a place that I outrage by my presence. If so, pray return with my answer, that there is no power in persecution to drive me from this home—that I may leave it

of my own free will some day, but at no man's bidding now—that here I take my stand, a stronger woman than you found me first.”

“Oh, Miss Shaldon—Mrs. Barclay,” cried Percy, “can you believe me guilty of the effrontery of coming to you with so vile a message as that? Can you attribute to me so ungenerous a part?”

“I am a woman who has lost faith in my fellow-creatures, just as my fellow-creatures have lost faith in me.”

“No!” cried Percy.

“No?” repeated Helena, wonderingly.

“I have not lost faith in you, madam,” continued Percy, with strange earnestness. “I have come to Weddercombe to tell you so. It is with that object I am here as an intruder in a home which accident has brought much grief to. I beg you to believe, Mrs. Barclay, that I see in you only a victim—that I would stake my life upon your innocence, and that you may rely upon me always as a friend.”

“You are aware that I have been tried for murder?” said Helena, coldly and calmly.

“They have told me so.”

“They believe that I was guilty of the crime,

but was fortunate enough to escape the consequences of it."

"What they believe, or disbelieve, is nothing to me," cried Percy, with increasing animation. "My sister is not against you; she is very, very sorry and distressed—she cannot credit the foul slander, and will come, I hope, to tell you so—she is not like this Merrick."

"Your friend!" said Helena.

"Oh, he is no friend of mine that thinks you capable of committing so heinous a deed!" said Percy.

"You have quarrelled with Mr. Merrick about me?" said Helena, wondering.

"Yes, madam."

"I am very sorry," said Helena sadly; "I was not worth quarrelling about, and separating such friends as I have heard that you two are. Every man has a right to his opinion, and there are no proofs of innocence to which I can direct you. Mr. Merrick does not look at the best side of human nature, but then he is older than you, and has had a terrible experience of life. You are very young, Mr. Andison."

"I am twenty-one," he hastened to explain; "I am not a foolish, headstrong boy, carried away by impulse and romance."

“You have not heard the facts—you have seen but little of me, and know less.”

“I do not wish to hear the facts,” said Percy, warmly; “I know only, madam, that you have been very unfortunate—that I have seen your sorrow, and been drawn towards it from the first day that you and I met in Hernley church. I knew it was a great sorrow, and I believe now that it is a great injustice.”

“Yes, you are very young,” said Helena, looking at him with a fair, bright smile, which quivered to his heart’s depths, “and very impulsive and weak, to come like this and tell me of your confidence. Still I am very grateful—I thank you very, very much. Heaven knows I have been waiting for human sympathy, hoping for it from some pure-hearted woman like myself, perhaps—not looking for my solace in a stranger’s generosity.”

“Oh, not a stranger! I have known you for six months; I have seen you very, very often—more often than you imagine or I can dare to tell you. You have been to me a mystery, but you——”

He stopped in his rhapsody as the colour mounted to the face of his listener. He had

betrayed himself in his warmth and earnestness, and little knowledge of active life; and there was a frightened look in the dark eyes regarding him.

"I shall be always a mystery, I fear," said Helena, as he paused, "and it will not be worth your while to comprehend me. I cannot explain the past, for that is a mystery by which I suffer still; but my husband died, and they say in York that I killed him."

"They lie!" cried Percy, energetically.

"Yours is a Quixotic defence of a helpless woman," said Helena, rising, and extending her hand towards him, "and you may repent it as you grow older and take the trouble to learn my story. Still, for the courage that brought you to Weddercombe to tell me of your trust, of your belief in me rather than in my detractors, for that warmth of this young English heart which cheers me with kind words, I thank you very humbly, and I bid Heaven bless you in this last farewell."

"Oh, madam—last farewell!" he cried, his hand trembling in her own like a timid girl's.

Yes, he was weak, and very young, poor Percy!

“It is not likely that we shall meet—that I wish you to constitute yourself my champion—that I shall see any of you again of my own free will,” she answered. “From Weddercombe I shall never stir again, and I will receive no one here.”

“Never leave Weddercombe—never leave it!”

“I think not,” she said. “I can shut myself away from the world, and not be more unhappy than I have been.”

“It will be a living tomb!” cried Percy.

“No, a quiet home,” answered Helena. “I have no friends to regret beyond this place.”

“Not one?”

“Not one.”

“If you would only let me call you friend!” he cried, his voice faltering and breaking, and his hand fastening on her so closely that she could not escape his clasp. “If you would believe that I trust in you, and would give me time to win your trust back in return—if you would believe in my long watch of you and deeper thought—if you would not turn away from one who has been yours, solely and wholly yours, from the first day you came to Weddercombe.”

“Cease—cease ; this is madness !” cried

Helena, snatching her hand from him and retiring with backward steps towards the door, whither he followed her with his hands outstretched.

“Yes, the madness of love!” he cried. “Oh, Helena, pity me!—have mercy on me! I love you!”

CHAPTER XIX.

VERY YOUNG!

PERCY ANDISON'S was an unceremonious dash at love-making, characteristic of his blundering self. It was out of time and out of tune. It was premature, and warranted by nothing which had preceded it, or which might follow. It was altogether one of those huge mistakes which full-hearted, single-idea'd men perpetrate and suffer from occasionally when carried away by the whirl of their own impulsiveness.

Percy had burned to show his faith in Helena Barclay, to demonstrate to her, by something striking and remarkable, that the world's verdict, the world's slanders, had had no power to turn him from his reverence. Below the depth of his student's nature lay the romance of a young man who had mixed but little in

society and seen nothing of life. She was in great trouble, and he had learned to love her long ago. And in trouble the truth came to the surface.

"Mr. Andison, you forget yourself," exclaimed Helena, almost as excited as her suitor by this sudden and strange avowal; "you affront me!"

"Ah, don't say that," cried Percy; "I would surrender my life to do you service—to save you from pain. Don't say that I affront you!"

"It can't be true," whispered Helena, half to herself; "it is wholly unnatural."

"Mrs. Barclay," said Percy, recovering a little, and speaking in a deep and suppressed voice, "Heaven is my witness that you would have never known of my passion, never have guessed at it, had you remained the woman whom I first found here. It is your misery which betrays my secret—the consciousness of your loneliness, of that affliction which you fight against, but which bears you down completely. I see in you an injured woman suffering under much suspicion, struggling vainly and growing weaker in the struggle, and I am forced to tell you that you are not alone—that I learned to love you long

ago—that I trust in you implicitly, and would stand between you and the world—that there is happiness only with you, and in the thought of you, for me.”

Helena Barclay had sunk into a chair again, and was trembling beneath the force of Percy Andison’s confession; there was no doubting the truth of it, and pity for him and his weakness was gaining ground rapidly, now that she was recovering from the shock. She was no longer afraid of him.

“Mine is a young life, Mr. Andison,” she said in a low voice, “and Heaven is witness that it has been a strange one, but this is not the least strange incident in it. What made you think of me? What folly led you to put faith in one whom all the rest distrust?”

“Ah, madam, I read truth and virtue in your face.” She smiled faintly.

“You are the first who has read so fair a story from it,” she answered; “yet I am none the less grateful, and none the less impressed by your confidence. But,” she added very quietly, as he uttered a low wild exclamation of surprise and joy, “you must not talk to me of love—that is far removed from any thought of mine.

I would entangle no man's life, and no man's thoughts with mine, so help me, Heaven! I am best alone. I should bring to you a heavy burden of unhappiness for dowry, and my money would be a curse rather than a compensation. Your life is beginning, Mr. Andison—mine was ended long ago."

"No, no!" objected Percy.

"You will thank me for my advice some day—a very little while hence," she said.

"What advice?" he murmured, in a faint bewilderment.

"I am going to advise you to leave Hernley," she replied—"to see London—to get away from what must be enchantment, to lure you from a life as suspected as my own. You have studied hard, and grown weak instead of wise; no man of prudence would have acted as rashly as you have done to-night. Had I been the adventureress they think me, I should have taken advantage of your weakness, your distraction, and have snatched at the opportunity of saving myself by your abasement. But I think that I understand you, and I am merciful in shutting from you every hope of me."

"Oh, not every hope!" he cried passionately

again. "I have been rash—I see my weakness in affronting you—but give me time to prove that this is not a boy's fancy, but the ambition of my life. Oh, Helena, give me time!"

"No," she answered firmly; "let it all end now, for your sake as well as mine."

"It cannot end," he muttered.

"If I could convince you of the folly of all this," she said, "before I thank you for your trust, for the honour even which you have done me by your rash avowal! I have told you that I would blight no man's future with the suspicions that beset me; and if, as by a miracle, my name was cleared, it would be to some strong brave man that I might turn for aid, knowing how weak I am, and what help through life I should require. There, do you understand me, Percy?"

It was the first time that she had called him by his Christian name, but he took no comfort from it; his quick perception assured him that it had been uttered in pity for his weakness, and to reconcile him to her conviction that he was the last man whom she could love.

"Yes," he answered, "I understand."

"Mine are hard words," she said more kindly, and as a woman might have spoken to one

many years her junior, "but it is no use talking sentiment and smoothing over hard truths. You are very young," she said once more that night to his discomfiture, "and will forget this in good time. It is a trial that Providence has sent early to you, and from which you will read your lesson presently."

He inclined his head gravely; he had recovered his composure; there were dignity and self-possession in his bearing as he stood before her. He had dashed at his love and been baffled—it was all over with his hopes, and she was killing him almost with compassion.

She rose and extended both her hands to him suddenly, and the action for a moment took him off his guard.

"And now that you understand me, and that there can be no mistake between us, let me thank you again, Mr. Andison, for your faith," she said. "It is the remembrance of this night that gives me new strength, for it assures me that there are truer hearts in the world than I thought. You come without a proof of my innocence, and in the face of facts in which other men believe, to protest that you place credence in me. Heaven bless you for it, let me say again before you go."

“If I could be of any service,” he began, when she checked him.

“The fashion of electing champions has died out with English chivalry,” she said, half sadly, half satirically, “and you must dedicate your life to a nobler service than to that of a woman who has been tried for murder.” She shuddered and changed colour: then she added quickly, “But I do not ask you to take back your confidence. I urge you to believe in me a little. I thought that I should learn to love my husband when they made me marry him—I was sorry when he died—I should have been glad to die instead of him, and get away from this! There,” she added, “I have not said a word to any living being—I have held back in my pride, and let them think the worst of me; but to you, who think the best, I tell a fragment of the truth,—only a fragment!—and thank you, ay, with all my soul! Good-bye.”

“Do you mean for ever? Is it possible?”

“Yes—yes, I think so,” she said, “for you will give me your word that this ends all—that you will never see me again?”

“I cannot do that.”

“You leave me in suspense and fear,” she cried reproachfully.

“Mrs. Barclay,” he said, very sadly, “I will do my best. I understand my folly, and I will try to profit by your counsel. But my faith will live as long as my love for you.”

He dropped her hands at last—she had made one feeble effort to withdraw them earlier, but she had placed them in his own for pity’s sake, and in gratitude, and he had clung to them—and went away blindly, and with his head bent down, a man who had failed miserably in the first great effort of his life to pass from his old self to a dream beyond it.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PAPERS.

PERCY ANDISON was not seen at Hernley Hall again that night. The next morning he took his breakfast in his room ; and it was not till the dinner-hour that he faced the various members of his family, and tried to look as steadily at Valentine Merrick as that rising young barrister looked at him.

The story of the identity of Miss Shaldon with the widow Barclay, who was tried at York assizes, had not been detailed to Sir Charles or Lady Andison ; only three persons at Hernley were in the secret at present ; it had not been bruited abroad—there was an instinctive desire not to promulgate the news without sufficient warrant, and a secret kind of hope in Florence's breast that there might never arise the necessity for so doing. Perhaps Mrs. Bar-

clay's innocence might be proved ; probably she might leave Weddercombe ; and, at all events, it seemed no one's province to cast another stone at her. Florence and Percy had been warned of their neighbour's character for their own sake ; it had been Val Merrick's task, and, unpleasant and painful as it had been to war against a woman, he had not shrunk from his duty. If it had fallen to other hands he would have been glad, for Percy had resented the information, and, in his indignation, had betrayed the force of the wild passion to which he had succumbed. Still Val Merrick was not sorry for all that had occurred—Percy would recover from the shock, and thank him presently. They who see their strong fancies torn from their grasp are not grateful to him who snatches them away, though it be for the after-good of their lives.

Percy was not a man whose nerves were of iron, and there were signs that within the last twenty-four hours he had suffered a great deal. If he had striven to take his place there in calmness, and to excite no extra attention, he was disappointed, for his mother, watchful through her gold-rimmed glasses, exclaimed at once,

“ What's the matter, Percy ? ”

“Nothing is the matter, that I am aware,” he answered.

He had steeled his nerves to respond with composure, but there was no smoothing over the haggardness which a sleepless night had created.

“You’re as white as a sheet, Percy,” affirmed Lady Andison; “we have not seen you all day, and something has happened, I am sure.”

“Hard study, I am afraid,” said Valentine, with ease, and by way of suggesting an excuse.

Percy took the hint immediately.

“Yes, I have been studying hard—very hard,” he answered.

They had had high words yesterday evening, or rather Percy had taken a high tone to himself, and resented every imputation against Helena Barclay, as though he had been constituted her defender, and Percy had not forgiven Val Merrick, or ceased to regard him as the author of the misery which had occurred, but he was grateful to the barrister for the suggestion. He was annoyed at Merrick’s friendly tone, but perhaps that was as well before company, although he was sure, very sure, that he and

Valentine would never be friends again. He had been deceived in him, and the man's hardness and cruelty were still amazing him.

"I wish there was not a book in the place," muttered Sir Charles—after which awful expression Percy's haggard appearance became no longer a matter of great interest.

Valentine Merrick took the lead in the conversation; he was a man paid to talk at times, and society relied upon one who was generally equal to the occasion. That evening he was unusually brilliant, he was full of repartee, and Percy, disposed to be unjust, thought what a cold callous wretch Valentine was to be relating his anecdotes thus glibly, and did not give him credit for endeavouring to divert attention from himself. Hence it was evident that Val Merrick had come down "with a run" from the high estimation in which Percy Andison had been inclined to hold him.

After dinner Val and Florence strolled in the garden. They were licensed to stroll by special engagement, and Sir Charles dozed, and Lady Andison looked now and then from the drawing-room window at the happy couple. Percy had gone to his own room, too depressed for general

company. Having been balked in his first love, he seemed disposed to sulk with the community at large.

There was but little florid sentiment, or anything appropriate to the occasion, between Val and Florence that evening; it was Percy Andison who formed the one topic of conversation.

"I should be very sorry, Val, if you and he were to become bad friends," she said.

"If he cannot see that I have only put him on his guard, and if he take offence at it, a friend like him is not worth having," answered Valentine, almost sternly.

"Oh, Val, you are offended too?"

"You heard how he went on last night, Flo, and yet last night's hard words I forgave him," said Valentine; "but the sullenness of to-day I should resent if——"

"If what?" asked Florence, anxiously.

"If he were not Flo's brother," answered Valentine, more tenderly.

"Thank you," said Florence, gratefully pressing her lover's arm with the fair little hand that rested on it; "I knew you would not make a grievance out of this, and that you would remember that Percy is desperately in love."

“Poor Percy!”

“Is he to be pitied for loving?” she asked, archly.

“For loving an unworthy object every man is—if he love in earnest.”

“Yes, but Helena Barclay has not been proved unworthy yet. Ah, Val, you mustn’t look cross,” she implored; “I don’t doubt you—and yet I don’t believe in this poor woman’s guilt. I—I have been trying—if only to oblige you—but I can’t—there!”

“Your sex is hard to convince,” said Val, laughing, “but I have done with the argument, and you must have your own way.”

“If you had only seen and heard her when we two were together, Val!”

“If I only had!” he cried, ironically.

“As for keeping from her altogether, like a coward, or running the other way when I meet her in the village, as if I were afraid that she was going to poison me next, I couldn’t do it, Val; and you must not try to persuade me.”

“Woman is naturally wilful,” said Valentine, sententiously.

“I’ll keep my word with you, and wait till

the papers come ; but as for always sneaking in a corner away from her—not a bit of it !” cried Floy, with excitement.

“Forcible, but not elegant phraseology,” said Valentine, lightly. “I admire your courage, though I am not impressed with that honour and obedience which you will have to swear to me one day. But if you can get over my papers, my brief, my collection of facts, you are a less sensible young woman than I take you for, Flo.”

“When will the papers be here ?” asked Florence, anxiously.

“They are here,” was the answer.

“Oh, let me have them ! Where are they ?”

“In your brother Percy’s hands by this time,” replied Valentine. “I have sent them up to his room, with my compliments. They arrived by this evening’s post.”

“Sent them to him ? He will destroy them.”

“The deuce he will !” said Valentine, taken aback at this. “He will never be so foolish as that ; he will respect property that does not belong to him ; and besides I shall be with him before he has finished reading.”

“Will he read them ?” asked Florence, dubiously.

“Every word of them, from the beginning to the end, in order that he may confute me with my own evidence, which, however, is overwhelming.”

“Will it convince a man who is in love with the woman whom it accuses?” asked Florence.

“Yes,” said Valentine, decisively.

Florence shuddered.

“I hope not,” she said, “for I cannot believe her to be so terribly deceptive. Oh! I could not believe in anyone afterwards!”

“Passing from one extreme to the other—like a woman,” said Valentine, stooping suddenly and kissing her cheek. “There, let us get Helena Barclay off our minds, Flo, and grow eloquent upon our own sweet selves.”

Florence blushed and looked down.

“I’ll try,” she murmured, “but——”

“But what?”

“But I should like you to leave the drawing-room early to-night, and go to Percy. I—I am uneasy about him, Val. I have never seen him look so wan and ill and wild as this. I will go to him now and tell him that you are coming.”

“No, don’t do that,” said Valentine hastily; “leave him to my papers, which will sober him

and strengthen him, or for once I am out of my judgment."

"How proud you are of your judgment!" cried Florence. "I am beginning to discover, sir, that you have a terribly good opinion of yourself."

"I am not the only barrister with that idea; and then I find humanity about me so positive, so obstinate, so easily impressed by fancies, so thoroughly disposed to discredit sober facts."

"And humanity about you so like Florence Andison!" she added.

After which badinage they forgot Helena Barclay for awhile.

In the drawing-room the woman under suspicion came to their minds again, and Valentine saw by his lady-love's grave looks that she wished him to depart in search of Percy. The conversation had come round to the son, and there was a grand excuse, of which Valentine availed himself.

"I'll go and see where he is," said Val, rising; "if I do not bring him down this evening with me, I'll stay and amuse him, if possible."

"You are very kind," said Sir Charles, drily;

“but I should leave him to get out of his tantrums with the same facility that he got into them.”

“That’s a nice paternal speech,” remarked Lady Andison.

“I don’t see why the whole house should be upset because he chooses to avoid us,” said Sir Charles.

“I don’t see that the poor boy’s upset anything but your sense of politeness, and——”

Valentine did not stay to hear more. He knew that Sir Charles and his wife would mutter their discontent for another half-hour. Sir Charles had been disappointed in his whist, and Lady Andison had neuralgic twinges that evening, and these marital sparrings were very frequent at Hernley Hall. They did no harm, and they led to no ill-feeling between man and wife; but spar this couple would, in season and out of season, as if their eternal bickerings brought to them some little recreation when other sources failed.

Valentine went direct to Percy’s rooms, two spacious apartments on the first floor, communicating with each other—the front room half-study and half-library, full of old books and

scientific apparatus, heaped and huddled together as in the den of an alchemist.

Valentine knocked, but Percy's voice from within did not bid him enter. After knocking twice without receiving a response, Valentine turned the handle and entered the room, closing the door behind him, and then pausing beyond the threshold.

"Don't move—don't speak to me yet," said Percy's voice, faintly, and yet urgently.

Valentine Merrick had been right in that judgment of which Floy Andison had told him he was vain. The Barclay papers were in the hands of the student, and the student, white and ghastly in the moonlight, sat in the deep recess of the window, which was open wide to the night, with a lamp burning on a small table at his side. It was a striking picture, at which Valentine Merrick might well pause, wondering, as he stood there, if after all he had acted wisely.

CHAPTER XXI.

UNCONVINCED.

IT was a face of misery, almost of horror, in the moonlight that streamed in at the window, which Percy had dashed open as if he had needed air, taking his place in the recess, and dragging a table and lamp to his side. He had unfastened his collar and white necktie, and one thin hand was fidgiting nervously at his throat, as though a sense of suffocation was upon him. His dress-coat was lying at his feet, along with a heap of papers, part of the damning evidence of which Val Merrick had boasted to his betrothed.

The barrister paused for a few minutes, and then, realising something of what had happened, he advanced very quickly.

“Percy, you have been overpowered—you are ill?”

“No—no,” muttered Percy; “let me be.”

“You will catch cold, sitting there in the draught.”

“There is not a breath of air stirring—let me be.”

“I am sorry if anything has seriously disturbed you,” said his friend, calmly; “but I thought you stronger than this, and I was anxious to let you know the truth, and to save you from a romantic and false theory.”

“Let me be,” said the hollow voice for a third time. “I have only a few more pages to read. For Heaven’s sake give me time to understand them!”

“I will wait.”

Valentine sat down a few paces from his friend, and watched him very keenly—his chin resting on his arms, which he crossed on the back of the chair. Here was a new study for which he had not bargained—a new phase of character in a man who had been dull and commonplace, even with all that wealth of learning which he had silently acquired unto himself. If it was not a mad face—if they were not mad eyes glaring at the manuscript—still he looked like a man whom horror, disappointment, and

mortification of spirit might drive mad, and he guessed then the full extent of Percy Andison's weakness. He did not interrupt him again, and when finally the paper fell to the ground, with the rest of the documents, printed and written, that lay huddled there already, he did not intrude in haste upon the misery of him whom he watched thus closely.

Percy turned to the window and looked out at the moon and stars, and drew in deep breaths of the night-air, with his thin hand still lingering at his throat; and it was not till he turned and regarded Valentine in a half-vacant way that the spell of silence which had reigned so long within the room was broken.

"You have read the papers, Percy?" Valentine inquired.

"Yes."

"And my old brief?"

"Yes."

"And my notes on the case?"

"Every one."

"Well?" said Valentine, interrogatively.

"And the result is that I believe in Helena Barclay's innocence!" cried Percy, with a sudden warmth of manner.

"Impossible !" said Valentine, quietly.

"I am not to be deceived by this artfully-concocted chain of incidents, welded together for your own end,—the deliberate destruction of that woman !" cried Percy, still more warmly.

"Percy !" said Valentine, half angrily, half reproachfully.

"Had the jury believed you at York assizes, she would have been hanged," said Percy, furiously. "Great heaven ! hanged by the neck till she was dead !"

"She killed old Barclay," said Valentine, very positively.

"It's a base lie !" answered Percy.

Valentine Merrick regarded his companion very scrutinisingly before he replied to him.

"I had had a hope that twenty-four hours' cool deliberation would have calmed you, Percy," he said at last—"would have given you time for sober reflection. I was sure, at least, that the perusal of those papers would have proved to you that I had not hastily judged Mrs. Barclay."

"You have added to the bitterness of her whole life."

"By endeavouring to save my friends from

her dangerous society. I cannot regret that," said Valentine, picking up his papers very carefully, and assorting them and refolding them as he continued his discourse.

"What are you going to do with those documents?" asked Percy, in a less excited tone.

"Not publish them," replied Valentine, "but read them again with a new interest, now that Helena Barclay's life has touched our own—a circle within a circle, widening out strangely, and taking in more lives and mysteries than we dreamed of last week. Will you tell me one thing?"

"What is it?" Percy rejoined, sullenly. "I cannot answer—I will not answer—all your questions."

"Where is the weak point here?" said Valentine, striking the papers on his knee. "What has suggested a flaw, a mistake, an idea—however fleeting—of Mrs. Barclay's innocence? If you have found one, I shall be quite as glad as you."

"For what reason?"

"Because hers is a face so like innocence and truth that its awful power to deceive amazes me, if I am right and you are wrong,"

was the reply. "And if you are right what deep injuries she has sustained—how she has suffered—what a life hers has been!"

Percy turned impatiently from the papers.

"I am heart-sick of them," he said—"they have frozen my soul. Do you think I could criticise and analyse that miserable story as though I cared nothing for her? I have only read her troubles, seen her martyrdom, shivered as she stood a hair's breadth from the scaffold—where you would have placed her if you could—thanked God when she escaped, as if this were a case of yesterday and I had loved her all my life."

"Yesterday, Percy Andison, you and I were friends, and already this woman has stood between us, and led you to utter words which from anyone else I should have resented. I have spared you," Valentine added, "for your sister's sake, for your own, seeing what folly it all was, and how unlike yourself you were. But you have said to-night that I lie—you have hinted that I have a motive in aspersing the character of this woman—in your silly championship you have set lance against one whom you have known from a boy, and in the defence

of a stranger with whom you have been acquainted only a few weeks. You trust her, you distrust me, and I will prove her guilt to you."

"I will not hear a word against her—never again, so help me Heaven!" cried Percy. "I asked her last night to become my wife."

"You!" cried Valentine in his surprise. "You are engaged—she and you are to be married presently!"

"She has refused me—she will never, never see me again."

He leaned his arms upon the window-sill, and sank his head upon them in his grief. There was another long silence, and then the hand of Valentine Merrick was laid upon his shoulder gently.

"Percy, I am sorry," said Valentine—"I had no idea that it had gone so far as this; only two days since and you denied your affection for her."

"We were jesting—this is stern reality," murmured Percy.

"Is it not rather a romantic weakness, which absence from home, or travel, or a strong will, will easily conquer?" inquired Valentine.

"After all, what do you know of Helena Barclay?"

"That I love her, and that she will never love me," answered Percy, looking up again. "I don't know anything else—I don't care to know."

"Nonsense! A man like you frames his heroine from the first pretty girl he meets, and this has been the result. Presently will come a brighter and a fairer and a better genius. Try to take my word for it, and let us forget all the hard words which in her defence you have heaped upon me."

"Her accuser!" said Percy.

"It's a hard name, but I do not know that it is misapplied," answered our hero. "I tried to save my friends from a dangerous acquaintance, and it was a painful task, from which I shrank. I have failed to convince one who should have believed in my honesty of purpose, and spared me from the charge of malice against a woman whom I saw yesterday for the third time in my life."

Percy did not answer. Something had suddenly attracted his attention in the park-land

beyond, for he leaned from the window and peered out.

“What is it?” asked Valentine.

“Nothing—only the old mastiff prowling about,” was the slow reply.

He closed the window, drew the heavy curtains across it, sat down wearily in his chair, and reached his hand out for the nearest book within his reach. Valentine took the hint and rose.

“Good night, Percy,” he said; “I shall sit up to-night and read these papers again, searching for anything in them that may tell in Helena Barclay’s favour.”

“You are prejudiced—and will fail,” muttered Percy.

“Good night,” said Valentine again.

“Good night,” was the slow response.

Valentine departed reluctantly. He was vexed at Percy’s obduracy; he was still more angry at the cold manner in which his advances towards reconciliation had been met; he was deeply grieved at his friend’s infatuation and folly; he felt that he hardly understood him.

Would he not have been more puzzled had he seen Percy Andison, after his departure,

draw back the curtains once more, open cautiously the window, and take his place thereat, as watchful and expectant as if with the deepening of the night he built on strange events coming to pass at Hernley ?

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER MYSTERY.

VALENTINE MERRICK repaired to his room in a stern and unenviable frame of mind. He was dissatisfied with the result of his interview with Percy ; he was sorry for the influence which the widow Barclay seemed already to exercise on the life of a man who would presently be related to him. He walked up and down the apartment, and thought it over, and grew more angry at his friend's infatuation the longer he took for consideration upon it. In Helena's refusal of Percy's offer for her hand, he saw only a fresh design, a deep-laid scheme to lure on a weak nature, and to steal back to society by the means of a second husband. The more time he took to reflect upon the point, the more he convinced himself of this ;

though there were strange breaks in his reasoning, and strange revulsions of feeling, for which he could not account, and which set before him the woman he suspected in all her grief and pride and beauty—an enigma beyond his power to construe.

“Very dangerous,” he muttered at last, “and trebly dangerous now that it has come to this. I must save Percy ; she must leave the place. He is no match for her ; he is awfully weak, and confoundedly obstinate. How hot the house is to-night ! Percy was right about the air at least ; one can’t breathe with all these curtains and windows closed.”

He opened the window and took his lamp to a little side-table standing in a recess similar to that wherein he had discovered Percy.

“I wonder if I look as cheerful a ghost as he did ?” mused Valentine, as he leaned back, lighted a cigar, and opened the documents which had already fascinated and terrified Percy Andison.

“‘The Helena Barclay case,’” he said, reading aloud the head-line of a newspaper which he had just opened, after which he indulged no further in soliloquy.

The Helena Barclay case ! If it had brought misery to one pure-hearted woman, it had at least brought fame to him. From that time he had prospered. He had made his mark before that day ; but here he had scored it deeply, and added to his strength and name. He had been talked of after that case ; he had become more famous already than many men who had grown grey and lined at the Bar. He had not won the day, but he had won his spurs ; and it was an obstinate jury that saved Helena Barclay, not a judge's summing up, nor a skilful counsel's defence. Everybody in the profession knew Val Merrick after that speech at York. The London papers had taken up the story of the crime, and, if it had faded out of recollection of late days, Valentine Merrick's dream of prosperity had not faded with it. He was rising in the world ; it was odd that the woman at Weddercombe had been the cause of it in some degree, and had helped him over what might have been years of a long and toilsome journey up the hill.

He let the paper rest upon his lap whilst he thought of this—and thought so deeply that his cigar went out, and he had to lose time in

relighting it, after which he set himself seriously to the business that he had on hand.

He was a rapid reader, and the facts were not new to him ; he went quickly but critically over the old ground, trying to see a reason for Percy's infatuation, a loophole of escape even for her whom he had long ago prejudged. But it was a story clear as water—there were the opportunity, the motive, the temptation, and the crime. It was a sin commonplace enough, and only startling on account of the position of the sinner and the wealth of the victim. Burial clubs and insurance offices had this crime to fight against continually, and to be swindled by. It was a something which interfered with profits, and could not always be shaken by its lying throat and brought to judgment. Ignorance had often wit enough to trade and trifle with life's sanctity for money's sake. Here was a young woman who got rich, immensely rich, and secured her freedom from tyranny at a blow.

"If Michael Barclay had not been such a horrible old brute," mused Valentine, "Helena his wife might have fared worse at the hands of a Yorkshire jury ; nay, if the Beast had poi-

soned the Beauty, instead of Beauty the Beast, poor old Barclay would have been hanged as high as Haman—not a doubt of it ; and Helena, the peerless, the dangerous, the deceptive, there is not a doubt of you !”

He tied the red tape round his papers again—he had read them all, and he had not chanced upon one extenuating circumstance. It was all clear enough ; no wonder that poor Percy had sat choking over the facts which he could not reason away. Val stood up and stretched himself ; he flung the stump of his cigar into the garden ; he leaned out and took a last look at the night and the night’s loveliness, with his hand upon the curtain which would shut out the scene a moment hence. The misty parkland, stretching in its light and shadow under the clear white moon, did not lead the gazer into rhapsody, but rather into a profanity that was sudden and startling.

“The devil !” ejaculated Valentine Merrick in his amazement—not that he had been surprised or shocked by any glimpse of that gentleman flitting about Hernley Park, Herne-the-Hunter fashion, but that the sight of Percy Andison, proceeding in great haste across the park, and

as if towards Weddercombe, took away for once that self-composure upon which he was disposed to plume himself.

It was Percy Andison, and not walking in his sleep. Somnambulists were not in the habit of running, and of jumping across deep trenches; they always seemed walking as if to slow music, and groping their way onwards—at least the only two that he had ever seen—Amina in the opera, and the housekeeper's son at his chambers, a fat lout, who ate heavy suppers, and whom he had met once in his rooms tilting up the decanters—in his sleep he said—and taken back by the ear to his mother.

Yes—unmistakably Percy Andison; and he was intensely sorry to see him stealing from the house when its inmates were supposed to be at rest. It had come to that already, then—to assignation and intrigue—the woman of the world luring the youth by the strength of his romance or the folly of his infatuation, and he, blindly credulous, striding on to his fate!

It should not be! He would save Percy in spite of himself. The man was being duped, and by a woman of no common craft or courage—one who stopped at nothing in the way of

her will, and whom no past danger terrified. What might happen he knew not, but he must interfere, at any hazard, for Percy's sake—for Floy's. In desperate cases one adopts desperate remedies.

He extinguished the light in his room for precaution's sake, seized his felt hat, and dropped from the window to the grass beneath, without a moment's consideration as to the means by which he should be able to return to the establishment. He had only one thought, to step between Percy Andison and Helena Barclay—to save one and to warn the other—to overtake Percy in the first instance, and remonstrate with him if he would listen.

But beyond the open ground there were deep shadows where no moonlight pierced, and where Percy Andison was completely lost. Percy knew every turn of hill and dale, and Valentine Merrick thought of this when he had reached the shadow-land himself, and found everything beneath the trees of a pitchy blackness which no eye could pierce. He of whom Valentine was in search had disappeared as completely as though he had sunk down a trap

prepared for the purpose. There was not a sign of him, and the only sound was the quick rustle of the leaves in the night breeze.

Valentine Merrick set his back against a tree, and reconsidered the position.

“Have I a right to watch him?” he muttered to himself—“to endeavour to discover him? After this night, will he not consider me his enemy?”

He quickly arrived at a determination; he had never been slow in making up his mind, and that doubt as to his own prudence which had seized upon him he shook off impatiently. It was a woman who had committed a murder, who might be leading on Percy by a false show of innocence, and who might even feel revengeful at the discovery of her identity. He did not know, he could not guess at the motives of one who stood so much apart from ordinary humanity. He was astonished at his own reluctance to proceed, at the frequency with which her fair countenance, full of pity, sorrow, pride—rose before him beseechingly, and checked him even yet. What a snare and a talisman to one of Percy’s temperament, when he him-

self felt that he would like to spare her, too, if she would only go away !

He passed through the deep belt of trees into the misty grey moon-shimmer once more, but in the landscape beyond there was no sign of human life. He went on, glancing back suspiciously, and then proceeding with a stern set countenance upon the way which he had chosen. He should find Percy in good time ; how to act, or what to say, upon discovering him, he did not know at present—chance must determine that.

He set his face towards Weddercombe—it was there that he should find Percy Andison, he thought. It was at Weddercombe that the mystery lived, and the woman who had taken her husband's life had raved about her misery and innocence. It was at Weddercombe that fresh troubles and fresh complications were rising rapidly about him and his friends, and he was advancing to fight against them, or to take his share of them.

He crossed the wire fence which formed the boundary line between the Andison estate and that which appertained to Mrs. Barclay's, and then went steadily onwards. Reminiscences of

his meeting with Helena seemed to take him in one particular direction, as if by instinct, for he went straight as an arrow towards the game-keeper's lodge.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OLD BATTLE-GROUND.

BRIGHT and clear as was the night, there was only shadow-land at Weddercombe, which might have represented the life of its owner, so dense and dark was it under its present aspect. The trees were too numerous, and the Summer foliage too thick, for much of the night's beauty to find its way here, and it was only by looking upward through a tracery of branches that one caught at times the fitful light of the stars.

Before the gamekeeper's lodge, where the building that was dropping fast to ruin usurped the place of what had once been woodland, some patches of moonlight fell across the grass, and gave a weird appearance to the scene ; and here, on the trunk of the tree which

last Winter's storm had levelled to the ground, Valentine Merrick took his seat, as he had done two days ago by the side of the woman whose life he had unveiled, and who had grown trebly dangerous.

Whether Val Merrick expected that she would take her place at his side again, or that she would return this way after her meeting with young Andison, is a doubtful point to ascertain; certain it is that he took his seat like a man determined to wait awhile, in the hope that the mystery would solve itself without further effort of his own.

It was not a cheerful spot in which to rest, and to think again of all that had happened since he came to Hernley—of the love-making and peace-breaking, of the friends and enemies that he had made in a few hours, of the romance which had seemed to meet him from the moment that he had set foot in this retreat, lying so completely apart from the wear and tear of his every-day life, and bringing about so new and utter a change that it might have been years since he was in his chambers in the Temple.

If he had really made enemies, it was scarcely

a safe place ; only a little while ago Helena Barclay had told him that even in the sunshine he should have learned to fear a meeting with her at that solitary spot, if he believed that she estimated at no value any life that stood in the way of her advancement. He remembered that mocking taunt upon her lips, and the disdain of her dark eyes, and he had not thought the worse of her—nay, had only been struck by her defiance.

Had he been a nervous man, he would not have sat there ; had he been more cautious, he would have been armed to resist, as though assassination might not be wholly out of date at Weddercombe ; but he was courageous, and he had never been a particularly prudent man. Here was a friend to save, a friend who had leapt at love like a harlequin, who might be ensnared at any moment, and linked for life to an adventuress, and he had come to rescue him. He would receive no thanks in return, but it was his duty to his friend, and to that friend's sister.

He was not quite certain that he had adopted the right course—for he had acted on the spur of the moment, and there had been no time for

sober reflection—but still he had a policy to follow, and he must warn Helena Barclay that there would be a stern opposition to any scheme of hers that sought to raise her in society by the sacrifice of his friends.

He sat and listened for approaching footsteps, but the heavy rustling of the trees was the only sound that disturbed the night's stillness. Percy, coming in search of his lady-love, would pass this way, and Helena Barclay, returning from a rendezvous, would have to make a wide circuit to escape it: he had not calculated his chances badly, and a visit to this part of the world twelve months ago had rendered him master of the situation. He could afford to wait half an hour, or an hour—his time was his own, and he was far from sleepy.

He had not been there a quarter of an hour, however, before the mystery which seemed congenial to Weddercombe, and appertaining to its solitude, took a fresh shape, and surprised him, stimulating his curiosity rather than unnerving him. As he sat facing the game-keeper's lodge, he became suddenly conscious that the door was slowly opening inwards. It was all very dark before him, but the door did

not open noiselessly ; it creaked and wheezed like a door that had suffered from inaction and inattention, and bad weather, and had rheumatic pains in consequence, and the sound of its grating hinges came sharp and distinct to the ears of the watcher, and set him on his guard.

The place was too full of shadows for Val Merrick to detect anything save a deeper blackness where the door had been a moment since, but, when the tall figure of a man stepped from the lodge and came with long strides towards him, Val thought it was quite time that he stood up and prepared for a crisis that seemed to be impending. This was a new and unlooked-for danger, and he must make the best of it. If he had ventured into the lion's den, it would be no use to beg the lion's pardon and withdraw—he must fight for supremacy, and against odds, if it were necessary. His heart beat more rapidly, but he was not dismayed.

“What are you doing here?” asked the newcomer peremptorily.

“Rather what are you doing in a place where you have no right to be?” asked Valentine in as stern a tone as the other had adopted.

“I am here on business,” was the short answer.

“So am I.”

“With Miss Shaldon?” said the man, betraying surprise at Val’s coolness of reply.

“With Miss Shaldon,” replied our hero.

“That’s infernally odd—if it’s true,” he added, doubtingly. “Resume your seat, young fellow—I am not going to hurt you.”

“That’s exceedingly kind of you,” answered Valentine Merrick; “for I never liked being hurt.”

The man resented this flippant tone. He had sat down on the trunk of the tree after his invitation to Valentine, but he looked up quickly and said, with no small fierceness,

“I could hurt you, if I liked. I dare say one blow of my fist would pulverise the life out of a man of your size, and I have never been disposed to receive insolence calmly or to take it as wit. He who insults me does it at his own risk; my temper was soured years ago, and I have been dangerous ever since.”

These remarks were not uttered in a boastful spirit, despite the angry tone of the speaker, and there was a ring of discontent in his last words that struck him who listened as peculiar.

“Shall I insult you very much more by asking

for a light?" said Valentine, taking a seat by his side and looking still more keenly into his face.

The man had taken a short clay pipe from his mouth to address Valentine; he passed it to him without saying a word, and Valentine opened his cigar-case, drew a cigar therefrom, and lighted it from the red glow in the bowl, puffing perhaps more than was necessary at the embers, and keeping his eyes fixed upon the man who had emerged so suddenly from the lodge.

He had seen him before—his memory for faces had not failed him; here at his side was one more actor in that terrible tragedy which had had its beginning in Yorkshire. In another place and at another time he would have passed him; but, meeting him at Weddercombe, he endeavoured to associate him with the life and mystery of its owner, and the truth came more quickly to the foreground than he at whom he gazed could readily believe.

"You'll know me again," said the man as he took the pipe from Val's hand.

"I knew you twelve months ago, Arthur Barclay," answered Valentine.

The man thus suddenly recognised muttered a half oath, and then put the pipe into his mouth

and smoked on in silence for several minutes. He turned to Valentine at last, and spoke in a hoarser, deeper tone.

"Very likely," he said; "if you have ever known Downton Manor House, or Downton Vale, you have known Arthur Barclay. He did not keep himself in the background, or hide his light under a bushel; he gambled, and drank, and raced, and fought, and blasphemed with half the reprobates in Yorkshire. He spent his money on them; he lent every vagabond money that came to him with a reasonable lie for it. Are you one of the old gang? For curse me if I can tell in this light! I fancy that you must be, by your infernal impudence. What name?"

"Merrick."

"I never heard the name, or it has been shut out of my thick head by the march of events of greater consequence."

"Very likely."

"Where did we meet last?"

"At the York assizes, when Helena Barclay was tried for the murder of her husband."

"Perdition seize you for reminding me of that!" exclaimed the man, angry in real earnest now, and turning upon Valentine, who held

back his head a little, as if doubtful whether his companion would clutch him by the throat or not. "How dare you come out of the darkness like a devil, and remind me of the horrors of that time? What is it to you? What accursed fate has brought a witness of it all to confront the woman who is hiding here?"

"Say, rather, what stern justice?"

"Ay—well—what stern justice?" repeated Barclay, letting his hands drop, and re-assuming as by an effort his calm demeanour.

"An accident has betrayed the identity of Miss Shaldon with your uncle's widow."

"I thought it would; as if she——" He paused, and then said, quickly, "What have you to do with her life or the story? If you are here for hush-money, name your price, and let me settle with you instead of that miserable woman."

"Why should you do that?"

"I don't know,—out of consideration for her feelings, I suppose," he added, with a short laugh; "and, at all events, to spare her the shame of such a meeting as this would be. If I see her—and it is just possible—I will tell her that I have done her one good service."

Valentine was puzzled at this ; but he hastened to explain.

“I am not here for hush-money. Mrs. Barclay and I already understand each other.”

“Are you fool enough, or rash enough, to be her lover ?” asked the man, leaning forward with an eager curiosity for Valentine’s answer.

“No,” was the reply ; “I am here in a friend’s interest, and simply to offer Mrs. Barclay my advice.”

“In this place ?”

“Yes ; I believe that she will pass in a few minutes.”

“I shall believe that you are an escaped lunatic presently,” said Arthur Barclay. “When I watched you from the house yonder, I had that idea first. Why should she come at such a time in this direction ?”

“Because you have sent for her.”

This was a shrewd guess of Valentine Merrick’s, for he could not imagine that Arthur Barclay would be waiting there without a motive. The man started, and his fingers pulled at his long moustache with a certain degree of perplexity, as he looked down at the grass and bracken growing at his feet.

“You are right,” he said at last—“because I have sent for her or her messenger. Perhaps you are her messenger instead of Mrs. Graves—is that it?”

“No,” answered Valentine.

“Then who are you?” exclaimed Arthur Barclay, with his old fierceness. “Do you think that I am here to guess your riddles, or that I shall allow you to remain and listen to my business?”

“I have said that my name is Merrick,” replied Valentine, still imperturbable and aggravating; “I can only add that my profession is the Bar, and that I was counsel for the prosecution when your aunt by marriage was tried for her life. I am not here with a mystery—I hate mystery, and am doing my best to stamp it under foot. It is in a friend’s interest that I have trespassed on Mrs. Barclay’s estate; what the extent of that interest may be I must decline to inform you.”

Arthur Barclay listened patiently, and when he had finished he struck a light on his fusee-box, and held it while it blazed and sputtered close to the features of the man who had intruded on his solitude, and who shrank not at

the inspection. This operation afforded Valentine the same opportunity of more closely examining his companion, and of judging how time had dealt with him since he had seen him last in a witness-box. At the Assizes he had been struck by the rugged face, its fierceness and firmness, the lines and scars thereon, and the big watchful eyes that redeemed it and softened it. The straightforward rough manner in which this man had given his evidence had impressed him at that time also, and Val regarded him with interest.

It was the same face, a trifle more lined and scarred, stamped with less anxiety and suppressed excitement, but with a greater depth of thought. In his evidence of twelve months since it had come out—under the triple pressure of an examination, cross-examination, and re-examination, all of which seemed directed to set him in a bad light—that he had led a desperate life and with desperate associates, thinking of little else save his own selfish will, and drifting by the common rule from bad to worse, until his name had grown a terror in the quiet Yorkshire village which murder had made famous. Valentine had been struck with the boldness of the

man's replies, by his supreme indifference to the light in which they set him, by the total absence of disguise about his past, by the courage with which he faced the Court. There had been something in Arthur Barclay that had interested him; and, with his soul in his own cause, he had felt indignant at the counsel for the defence stripping from the man's past every rag and shred of self-respect, and suggesting where the real criminal might be lurking.

Arthur Barclay had not altered much; but, if there was any change, it was for the better, Valentine fancied, in the few brief moments which the light allowed.

"Yes, you're the man," said Barclay. "I thought the voice was not unfamiliar. You can't be getting up a case here," he added, thoughtfully; "they don't put barristers on the business of police-officers, and you have met Mrs. Barclay by accident. I think that I understood you to say as much as that?"

"Accident has made me acquainted with Mrs. Barclay again," returned Valentine.

"Then it is not the old business which brings you to the place to-night?"

"No."

"I'm glad of that; keep your own counsel, and don't trouble me again," he said, bluntly. "I have enough business upon my mind to care very little for yours, only your sudden appearance took me into that hiding-place along with the rats. But I think that I understand one thing." He laid a heavy hand on the arm of the barrister.

"What is it?" asked Valentine.

"That you have no faith in Mrs. Barclay; that your idea of her character, her strength of will, and her duplicity, is on a par with mine? You barristers say a great deal that you don't mean, and rave of the virtues of your miserable clients; but, when you spoke at York against Mrs. Barclay, you believed that she swept that old man's life away remorselessly?"

"Yes."

"You did not think that it was I," he said, with greater excitement; "my career did not suggest that it might end in such a crime as hers?"

"No."

"And your opinion is unchanged?"

"Wholly unchanged," replied Valentine Merrick.

"Then I'll tell you what brings me to Weddercombe," he said.

"I thought that you were not going to trouble me again," said Valentine, dryly.

"I have altered my mind. Consider," he replied, as his hand fell heavily on Val's arm again, where it rested like a hand of metal, "that I subpoena you for a witness—for I shall want one presently."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MESSENGER.

THE conference thus strangely begun, and which might have had a stormy ending, seemed taking an amicable turn, as the two men sat together in the shadows, like conspirators plotting against the peace of Helena Barclay. The idea suggested itself to Valentine, and he imagined the fresh astonishment and indignation of the hunted woman at finding them together. Appearances would be against him once more, and she would believe that he was using every means to get at the secrets of her life, in order to disclose them to the Andisons. It did not matter what she thought, Val conjectured, and her suspicions might aid him in his own cause; but still he scarcely cared for the false light that might play upon his motives. Strange that he should not wish to

appear in the light of a spy, in the eyes of such a designing woman as this—but so it was, he fancied.

“I have come to Weddercombe to pay this lady some money that I borrowed of her,” said Arthur Barclay, “and I wrote to her that she would find me here.”

“A queer place to settle money matters.”

“Ay, it is,” was the reply, “but it suits us both. She has a repugnance to meet me at any time—just such a horror as a woman might have who thought that I had killed her husband. From the day of her arrest, even in her prison, she has kept up that farce—as though she would deceive herself, if possible.”

“And she has lent you money since?”

“She gave me last Winter ten thousand pounds—or rather she flung it at me with a theatrical scorn and gross munificence—a gift by which she thought she would satisfy her conscience, and even my rapacity. I was starving, and I took it. I can’t say that I am a rich man now, but I bring it back to her, along with a fair amount of interest, and I thank Heaven that I shall be free once more from the shame of such a charity. So—you—see—now”—striking

Merrick's arm with each word, to give force to his interpretation—"that I will have no share in Uncle Michael's money. She strove for it all—she sold her soul for it—and I will have no part and parcel with her unholy bargain."

He dashed his pipe from his lips to the ground, he clapped his hands together, sprang to his feet, and walked to and fro; he flung himself by the side of his listener again, and said,

"You shall be my witness to the transfer; you are a man whom I can trust, and my good genius—sometimes I think I have one, for all the devil in me—has sent you to me this day."

"I don't see why you should drag me into this affair," said Valentine, hesitating again; "it is a matter that rests entirely between you and Mrs. Barclay."

"Yes, but I do not trust the lady," said Arthur. "Suppose there is some scheme to— No, after all, that is not like her."

"Then you can dispense with my services?" said Valentine.

"I don't know that I can," was the answer; "and, as you are here to meet Mrs. Barclay—and, by heaven, I cannot understand how that is!—we may as well confront her together."

“Hark!” said Valentine—“is she approaching, do you think?”

Both men listened attentively, and in the silence of the night it was evident that footsteps were advancing.

“She must come from that direction,” said Arthur Barclay, pointing towards Hernley; “this must be another intruder—another visitor perhaps to the fair widow,” he added, with a scornful laugh.

“I had thought it possible that Mrs. Barclay might come that way,” answered Val.

The tall man peered into Val’s face again, and then turned away, shrugging his broad shoulders.

“Well, well, there is no telling what she might do, or guessing what her life is like,” he said.

He planted his elbows on his knees, clasped his head between his hands, and sat almost indistinguishable in the night that seemed to deepen there; and when Valentine rose, as if to meet her who was advancing, he took no heed of him.

The footsteps came nearer to them. They were faltering and irregular, Valentine thought,

and once or twice they ceased for a while, and then came on again, becoming heavier and slower as they advanced more closely homewards. Presently a dark figure, closely wrapped from the night air, emerged from the narrow path amongst the trees, and Valentine went towards it.

"Stay," he said, "one moment before you proceed farther, so that I may explain to you alone the reason for my intrusion."

"Mr. Merrick," said a harsh voice in reply—"you here !"

"Mrs. Graves !" exclaimed Valentine.

"Well, what of Mrs. Graves ?" said the woman, defiantly. "Has she not a greater right to be here than yourself? And with what object do you bar my way ?"

"Where is your mistress ?"

"Where she should be—in her own house, and," she added, caustically, "minding her own business."

"You have taken a message from her to Percy Andison to-night—you have met my weak friend at her instigation—don't deny this."

Mrs. Graves appeared to shrink for an instant at his vehemence.

"You have watched me. Why should I deny it?" she said, recovering her composure. "I have met Mr. Percy Andison."

"I thought so. Now tell your mistress—no, I will see her myself," he said; "you are a woman whom I cannot trust."

"Not with a word, sir, that would wound her young heart, if I could stand between it and your malice," replied Mrs. Graves—"which I can do, and which I have done."

"I bear no malice against your mistress, but I am solicitous for him who is fast becoming her dupe. You know!"

"Oh, yes—I know," said Mrs. Graves, contemptuously; "you are afraid that Mr. Percy Andison will marry Helena Barclay, and degrade himself and family by the alliance. But he will marry her, in spite of you. I say it to your hateful face!" she cried.

"I will see your mistress now," said Valentine, very firmly.

"You may add one more drop to the cup of her bitterness, if you please," she said, with a strange calmness replacing her past passion, "and then your power is at an end. You will be sorry for the part you have played in that

girl's life. You have hunted her down in vain—mark an old woman's words."

"I have not hunted her at all."

"You have brought to her existence and mine a desolation, and we shall remember it, both of us, whilst we live," said Mrs. Graves, meaningly. "Now, if you will see my mistress, follow one who has not the strength to stay your inclination."

She moved on, and the figure crouching by the tree's trunk caught her quick eye.

"What accomplice have you there?" she asked.

"It is one on whom I have chanced," said Val in reply.

Mrs. Graves walked towards him, stooped and looked into his face, suppressing a half scream of astonishment at the discovery.

"Arthur—you here, too! After all that you promised, cannot you spare her?" she said, almost in entreaty.

He stood up, and shook himself like a man who had been aroused from sleep. "I have come to pay the money back," he said.

"You!" ejaculated Mrs. Graves; "and have you written to tell her so?"

“Yes, two hours ago.”

“I have been more than two hours away,” said Mrs. Graves, “and she has been alone, terrified by your letter, and praying for me to return and advise her what to do. Oh ! that I could see what would become of her without me.”

“You had always that fear, Jane ; you used to wonder once what would become of me without your righteous paw indicating the road that I should take,” Arthur Barclay said, in that half-ironical, half-kind tone of voice with which he addressed her once before. “Come, old girl, there is nothing very terrible in my calling to pay back Mrs. Barclay’s loan of ten thousand pounds. Why do you shiver at the prospect ?”

“I am not shivering,” replied Mrs. Graves ; “and perhaps it is as well that you should come to-night. I can’t say,” she added thoughtfully, “but I think I am glad that you are here.”

She led the way towards the house at Weddercombe, proceeding in advance by some few yards, and then coming suddenly to a standstill, and motioning Arthur to her side.

“I have not been well, boy,” she said to him ; “I had a shock some days ago, and am recovering but slowly. Let me lean upon your arm.”

“You must have altered very much, Jane,” said he, “to ask for this support.”

“Yes, you are right,” was the reply; “I have altered awfully.”

They went on together then, and it was in this strange and amicable conjunction that Helena Barclay saw them advancing from the window of her drawing-room. She had been standing there, straining her eyes into the night for a sight of friend or foe. She knew that both were beyond the precincts of her home, that both might approach at any moment, but not together and in that strange fashion—she had never dreamed of that!

CHAPTER XXV.

REPARATION.

HELENA BARCLAY shrank back from the window at which she had been watching, and went with hasty steps towards the couch, in a corner of which she cowered until her strange visitors were admitted.

No one asked her permission to enter; Mrs. Graves had taken that warranty upon herself, and her will had always been law at Weddercombe. How unlike that isolation from the world which Helena had promised herself, and what a mockery of the place and of the burying of the past it seemed, when the housekeeper ushered into the room those two men who believed the very worst of her!

Those two together! What new misery might not that portend? Could she bear

more, now that the old had nearly crushed her, and her last effort to escape the past had been a failure more complete than all the rest? Had misfortune steeled her to resist further trials, or would another ordeal wholly break her down? She only knew that the uncertainty was appalling and paralysing, and that she huddled away from them, a woman scared almost to death, and with her pride and dignity quenched out. She had fought many battles with her accusers; only a day or two back she had borne herself bravely before them, but she was completely helpless now. She gave up!

Mrs. Graves seemed to realise the feelings of her mistress. She went at once towards her.

“Courage,” she said—“I have brought good news instead of bad. This is the beginning of the end, whatever these men may say to-night. Keep strong only a few hours longer, in the name of mercy.”

“Where have you been? Why did you leave me all this while?” murmured Helena, faintly.

“Have you missed me so much?” was the irrelevant rejoinder.

“Ah, yes! When you are away something always happens.”

"Heaven help her, then!" muttered Mrs. Graves, despairingly.

"I—I have had a letter," whispered Helena, "from him whom you have brought here to-night. Did I not say," cried she, with a flash of the old spirit asserting itself, as she turned to Arthur Barclay, "that I would never see you again—that the sight of you was a horror to me which I could not bear? Had I not your word to keep away? And you, sir," she added, with a sudden and strange forbearance that thrilled Valentine with its intensity of pathos, "might have spared me this fresh indignity at least."

Before Valentine could reply—and he was for ever afterwards grateful for the quick response of the man who had forestalled him—Arthur Barclay said,

"The gentleman is here at my invitation, and as my witness; what other business may require his presence I know not and care not."

"At your invitation?" murmured Helena.

"Oh! madam," said Arthur Barclay, scornfully, "I have not come to torture you with any allusion to an old story, or to submit again to that version of it which sets the guilt on me.

The world has judged between us long ago."

"And Heaven will judge presently," murmured Helena.

"Meanwhile on earth we'll talk of money matters, madam," said Arthur Barclay, roughly, "which, if you had attended to my note, might have been settled through this happy medium."

He nodded towards Mrs. Graves, who said, as if in excuse,

"I was away on business of my own."

"There is the ten thousand pounds you lent me last Winter, Mrs. Barclay," said Arthur. "In the presence of this gentleman, and of Jane Graves, I restore the amount, with five per cent. interest thereon—and I breathe more freely for it."

Helena Barclay mechanically took the packet of notes which he handed to her, and murmured, almost helplessly,

"What am I to do with this? Why do you bring it to me?"

"To acquit myself of a heavy debt of obligation, I have said already."

"Yes—yes—so you have."

She continued to gaze at the carpet, until he bade her, almost peremptorily, count the

notes, which she did in the same apathetic manner.

"I will write you a receipt," she murmured, "if you wish it. But it was a gift—not a loan."

"That is why I have asked this gentleman—who knows us both so well—to bear me witness that I restore the money, thanking God that I am above your patronage; otherwise no one would believe me—not even with your written testimony to back a vagabond's statement. They would say—even you might say—that I had forged the document; for what is forgery but one of my lighter offences against the majesty of the law?"

It was bitterly spoken, and Helena Barclay glanced towards him as if his manner were new to her.

"Will you leave me to myself now?" she said faintly. "There is no more to say, I hope?"

"I have no more to say."

"The—the receipt—if you wish—I——"

"It is unnecessary, now that you own that it was a gift—a gift which I restore."

"Stay," said Mrs. Graves, as he made a faint inclination of his head and moved towards the

door. "I—I have business with you, Arthur, and you must not go. Helena," she said, turning to her mistress, "you must leave me with him; he was like my own son when he was young—I was at his mother's death-bed, and promised to watch over him, and broke my promise when he went wrong in spite of me. He is not so bad as you believe or I have thought. I loved this boy very much—he is drawn to my old heart again to-night as I never thought that he would be again. Leave us—I would make peace with him."

Helena was bewildered; but she rose at Jane Graves's bidding, and went from the room, Valentine Merrick watching her in silence. He had not the heart, after all, to talk of Percy Andison. She had not met him; there would be time to act in after-days—and this woman was in deep trouble, with all the world against her. Hence let him have the charity to spare her for awhile. As the door closed upon her, Mrs. Graves turned to him.

"You will not remain," she said, in a low, stern tone, that showed her hate of him as plainly as if she had spoken it; "there is no more mischief for your hands to-night. All

that has happened—all that will happen—is your work.”

“I will hold myself responsible,” said Valentine; “but——”

“I cannot hear you,” she hissed forth, passionately; “there is not time for it. What you would ask of me, ask of your friend, who is empowered to tell you why I met him. Mr. Anderson is waiting for you.”

Valentine, more impressed by the woman’s manner than he would have cared to confess, withdrew at her appeal. His task was done; there was no excuse to stay. He did not believe in Mrs. Graves or in her statement—being a man always hard to convince—but he would go back to Hernley Hall, nevertheless. His mission had scarcely been successful, but there was more to follow, and more to do, he was assured,

As the door closed on him, Mrs. Graves raised her hands above her head and cursed him for the evil that he had brought to that house, and Arthur Barclay sat and watched her curiously, his hand twitching at the end of his long moustache, after his old habit.

“I surprise you,” she said, turning to him.

“Not much,” answered Arthur; “you were always an extravagant woman in your temper, taking your manner—catching it possibly—from Michael Barclay. Why do you curse the barrister?”

“He found us out when we were in peace—when she was learning to forget the past, and all, with Heaven’s help, might have been well.”

“And you expected Heaven to help her!” exclaimed Arthur Barclay.

“Why not? Ah!” she said quickly, and with a half scream, “don’t tell me—don’t say it again—or even you will be sorry for it. I want you to promise me, on your word of honour—on your oath—to do one thing for me.”

“For you?” muttered Arthur.

“For myself only,” was the reply.

“If for yourself, friend,” said Arthur, warmly, “I will do it—for the old time’s sake of which you spoke to-night. I thought that you had learned to hate me too.”

“I tried once; but, oh! I could not. And when you were hard and cruel and ungovernable, Arthur, I prayed for you the most.”

“Did you?” said Arthur Barclay, wonderingly. “When I was at my worst, and past pray-

ing for? Now, to think of that from you!"

He was a big, strong man, who had faced much trouble and done much wrong, and who had hardened for lack of kindly sympathy and friendly interest; but he put his fingers to his eyes to stop the tears there.

"Now promise me, Arthur?"

"I have promised."

"In all his recklessness I never knew Arthur Barclay to break his word," said Mrs. Graves; "but I would ask him to swear this to his Maker."

"In your service, yes—in hers, no," he said; and he swore to this with grave solemnity, and then waited for her mission.

"Arthur Barclay, I want you to go with me to York," she said.

"With you? When?—at what time?"

"To set out with me, now that I am broken down, and of no further use to her—now that the old servant has given up, and sees the hopeless nature of the task she strove for."

"Ah, you mistrust her at last!"

"To set out at once—this very night, this very hour," she said, paying no heed to his exclamation; "to strengthen me when I give

way, as I may do, for I am weak and sinful ; to let me feel that I am not alone, but that he who knows me best keeps with me to the end."

"To what end?" asked Arthur.

"The end where justice meets me and the gallows waits ; for——"

"Well—well?"

"For I poisoned Michael Barclay!"

She gave way, and sank down at his feet, a woman abject, prostrate, and storm-tossed, and put her arms about his knees in her abasement.

"Good Heaven!—you!" cried Arthur.

"Ah! don't curse me for it yet; wait till I have told you all—of my long temptation, and my motive for it. As we go on together, I can tell you every word—not now. Now you must pardon me for that blight I brought upon two lives I had hoped to brighten by the crime to which I was driven."

"You—you!" muttered Arthur Barclay, like a man in a dream—"is it possible?"

He passed his hands through his hair, and clutched wildly at it in his great astonishment; he struggled for his breath; he tried to raise Jane Graves from the ground, and marvelled that he had grown suddenly as weak as

a child. He had not strength to utter that forgiveness which she implored, and she took it as a sign of his inflexibility.

“I haven’t one excuse, and I am as certain of that now as I was from the very moment of his death,” she wailed forth; “but it was less hate of him than love for you and Helena that brought me face to face with murder. I did not grudge him his life—I had been his slave too long for that; but I thought of you two, and your years of happiness without him—of your becoming a better man, and Helena approaching heaven more surely. Don’t you see?—oh! don’t you see, Arthur, why I killed him?”

“Go on—I guess at it, that’s all.”

“He was not fit to live,” she cried, in wild extenuation of her crime; “after all, a crueller man never made another’s existence a misery—he was sordid and unjust and revengeful. It was his opposition to you, his hate of you, his terrible neglect, that made you shun him, drove you to evil courses, ruined you.”

“Ay, body and soul,” said Arthur, shaking his head ruefully; “but I did not ask you to avenge me.”

"You were his brother's child, and I was your foster-mother; your wrongs were like my own, and every step downward was a dagger in me—I wept whilst he exulted. He was—"

"He is dead. In mercy's name let him rest!" cried Arthur Barclay. "Get up, be wise—don't tell me any more."

"Only to say that when Helena became his wife—talked into it by the foolish father who lived but a few weeks after she was married—dragged from a boarding-school into his arms, I loved her for her gentleness and patience under his severity. She clung to me in her helplessness, and there was no one else in all the world who cared for her. So,"—lowering her voice, "when he became the tyrant to her that he had been to you—when I saw that, with advancing years, he grew a greater villain, I struck one blow to save her."

"Don't tell me," muttered Arthur, still in protest, and still vainly essaying to raise her from the crouching position at his feet. But the woman would not rise until she had pleaded in her own defence.

"The only thing I saw before me was freedom for you two," she cried; "and if happi-

ness had come to either of you, I should not regret it. There, I own it—I am no coward—see, I don't flinch at saying this!"

"Horrible!" muttered Arthur Barclay.

"If I had only saved you—or her, Arthur," she continued, "but you were stubborn, and she was charged with the crime. Had they condemned her at York, I should have confessed. Escaping by a miracle, I hoped, I did strive to think, that time would soften the shock and make her, conscious of her innocence, the woman that she ought to be. But the slander followed her—there was no escaping it—and she has been slowly sinking, sinking down. I have been watching like a lynx, though—and now that my confession can only reinstate her, bring friends about her, open out to her that life which in my vanity I thought it was in my own power to create, I make it willingly."

"I will not hear another word! I——"

"My confession was made to the one man who believes in her. I told it him to-night. She drove me to it, for she was giving way and turning from me too, and then what was left for Jane Graves? To-morrow, at York, I charge myself with Michael Barclay's murder."

“I will not accompany you.”

“You have sworn—I must have one friend, one old face! Don’t break your oath to a woman as helpless as I am! And, oh, Arthur, forgive me!”

“For the harm that you have done me—and if you have done me any harm—take my pardon,” he said; “it is beyond my power to forgive aught else.”

“Ah, I know that,” she murmured, as she rose and pushed back her grey hair beneath the old bonnet that she wore still.

Glancing at her strongly-marked and resolute features, Arthur marvelled then why he had never thought of her as capable of killing his uncle, and why her long years of faithful service should have weighed more in the scale than the youth and gentleness of the wife whom no one mistrusted till she was Michael Barclay’s widow.

“And she knows all?” said he, interrogatively. “And yet——”

“She knows nothing—I dare not tell her!” she cried, quickly. “I would rather die than do it. She will turn away from every thought of me—when I am gone, but not before. She will part from me to-night with the old looks

and words of faith, and only shudder at me afterwards. And my last thought of her will be the fair young face I loved so well, and sinned so deeply for—the first one, Arthur, who was ever kind to me—the last.”

“Where are you going?”

“To her room. You will wait for me?”

“Yes,” answered Arthur Barclay, thus appealed to.

She closed the door upon him, and went up the stairs with grave composure—the woman who had resolved and acted, and who looked not round for escape, nor dreamed of it. She had striven hard to bring happiness to Helena Barclay—failing in this, let her confess and shiver into pieces the mystery which had walled in a young life from light. She had looked forward to this when every other chance had been lost. And after this there could come no fresh trouble so desperately bad or so hideously close. She took off her bonnet and dropped it on the landing-place, and went into Helena’s room, after smoothing her grey bands of hair with her large strong-veined hands. The lamp was burning dimly in its old place

upon the bracket, and Helena lay in her bed, big-eyed and wakeful.

"You have been waiting for me?" said the woman.

"Yes, dear—I cannot sleep to-night. Has he gone?"

"He is going now—directly."

"He returns the money—even he will not touch my gold, nor trust in me."

"He will presently. There is a change in him, and for the better."

"Ah, you tell me so," she answered, smiling faintly,

"There is a change in all of us—and I think, child, that we have seen the worst, and from this time things will mend."

"How is that possible?"

"I think so—and I am never very sanguine."

"What have you heard? Oh, is there good news? Can there be any chance of that?"

"Wait till the morning. I don't know yet—I have not heard of anything myself, and yet I'm strangely hopeful. Good night—sleep well—you have prayed for yourself and for the poor old woman here?"

"Oh, my one friend—staunch and true—as if

I had forgotten you in any prayers of mine !”

“Heaven bless you then, pray on !”

“Good night—and there is nothing more to tell me,” she said, her arms round the neck of the withered face bent close to hers—“you are sure ?”

“Nothing more, my darling.”

“You will call me at the usual time, Jane ? We will have a long day to-morrow in the grounds.”

“Ah—a long day together !”

“And so good night again.”

The old woman was strong to the last, and yet that was their last meeting. Never again were servant and mistress to see each other, to kiss each other as they did in that moment of their parting. She went out of the room with the same steady step, and it was only the wild uplifting of her arms without that told of her despair.

She stooped and clutched at her bonnet, and then groped her way downstairs, as a woman might have done struck blind by something more fearful than a rain of tears. In the drawing-room she was rigid and stern, and in that awful power of her will, that terrible self-repres-

sion, one could imagine the hidden danger that she had been.

“I am ready, Arthur.”

The man who had been brooding there rose with a half groan, and followed her to the door with grave unwillingness. A maid-servant was in the hall, and the housekeeper Graves said.

“I shall not be long, but go to bed. I have the pass-key to the house.”

“Very well, ma'am.”

She stepped into the darkness, and, as the door closed, she glanced upwards to the window of Helena's room.

“So the new life begins for her. Will you hope with me, Arthur, that it may begin and end in peace?”

“Yes, I can hope that now,” he murmured.

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